# HOPALONG CASSIDY'S PROTÉGÉ

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# Hopalong Cassidy's Protege

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A. L. BURT COMPANY

Publishers New York

Published by arrangement with Doubleday, Page & Company
Printed in U. S. A.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

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## CHAPTER I

### A WHITTLIN' DEPUTY

HOPALONG CASSIDY sat on the edge of the table in the sunny dining room of the Double-Y ranchhouse and listened to what his old-time foreman, and present partner, was saying. On Hopalong's weather-beaten countenance was an expression of surprise; but in his mind there was no surprise whatever. He had been home three weeks, and in that short time, mostly spent in riding carelessly around the country, or in whittling toys for the few children on the ranch, he had learned as much as the worried man in front of him had absorbed in ten times that interval. Inwardly Hopalong smiled, for the scene was not new to him; when good, slow, reliable Buck Peters, now a sheriff, got into things over his head, he always turned to the younger man. Incidents popped into Hopalong's mind from out of the past, and he looked at the sheriff with kindling eyes: good old Buck, a man so honest that he took far too many men to be the same. To Hopalong's way of thinking Buck was not properly

suspicious, and he lacked imagination. He was too trustful, too easy-going.

"Reckon I'm gettin' old, Hoppy," confessed the sheriff of Twin River County. "I took too long to smell out that somethin' like this was in the wind. When I did begin to smell it, I didn't seem to know, somehow, just what to do, or how to make a start ag'in it. There was a time when I wasn't that way, a-tall. This settin' 'round a ranch that runs itself, with nothin' much to do, has put a lot of fat *in* my head. With you an' Tex both away, I was sorta lost."

"Buck," said Hopalong, crossing his feet, "it ain't fat; it's yore fool idear that every man's honest. If you had any reason to believe that way, it wouldn't be so bad; but you've been buttin' ag'in cattle-thieves all yore life, an' you shore oughta know better by this time. You used to say that I believed every man was a crook until I found out he was honest; an' you sorta hold it ag'in me: yes, you do! Comin' right down to cases, who's been right most of th' time, you or me?" He paused a moment. "Buck, I can ride into Twin River right now an' put my han's on a dozen fellers that'd steal cattle. Every no-account scourin' that hangs out in the Why-Not saloon will steal cattle, give 'em the chance. Why ain't you said somethin' about this before?"

Buck's frown became a little perplexed.

"Why," he said, "you said you was off the warpath, an' was aimin' to set in the shade an' whittle. From what I've heard you was entitled to set an' whittle. You told me, yoreself, that you was trainin' that cold-

blooded Mesquite cub. Anyhow, you must 'a' heard somethin' about it without me tellin' you."

Hopalong studied the pattern of the worn carpet, chuckled, kicked his hat across the room, and looked up.

"I heard about it; heard a-plenty," he confessed.

"Then why didn't you say somethin' or do somethin'?" demanded Buck. "Yo're a deppity, ain't you?"

"I've allus considered myself one since you pinned on the badge an' swore me in," admitted the younger man.

"Well?"

"I was markin' time, Buck," said Hopalong, slowly. "Mesquite is due to wander back up here 'most any day to argue me into goin' off som'ers with him. He'll find the towns dirty an' crooked; he'll find men are like a lot of ticks; he'll wonder why the Lord ever made 'em, an' he'll drift back here to pester me." He paused, lost in rapt meditation, swiftly reviewing his own lost illusions.

"An', meanwhile, the cows of this county have been disappearin' slow but steady," accused Buck. "Down south, up north, over east—every which way, except from this ranch; an' there's no tellin' when they'll start runnin' off some of ourn, just by way of pullin' the sheriff's nose. Yo're a hell of a deppity, settin' in the shade whittlin' toys for the kids while cattle are bein' rustled!"

"But there ain't no fat had time to pile up under *my* hat, not in three weeks, anyhow," replied Hopalong. "An' for three weeks there ain't been much rustlin', I'll bet. An' don't forget that a man can do a lot of thinkin', settin' in the shade an' whittlin', an' he can get a lot of funny notions just by ridin' over the country.

Besides, not havin' yore trustin' disposition, I was savin' up four names to tell Mesquite when he came back. Then I was goin' to put him ridin' sign along the river between here and Twin River, while I shifted out in the sun, kinda, an' started huntin' for strays in the hills over west." He winked at the sombrero lying against the wall. "After that, pretty *pronto*, hell would 'a' busted loose in this here peaceful county of honest men, an' flickered here an' there over most of the state. Mesquite's due to arrive 'most any day, unless I've bungled in sizin' him up. An', Buck, there was another reason why I set in the shade." He winked at the hat again, and waited.

Buck was staring at his cheerful deputy as he had stared at him through the years. "What you mean?" he blurted.

"I mean that yore way ain't my way. Yo're allus worryin' that there may be a corn on any foot yo're fixin' to step on; *I'm* hopin' it's all corns, an' I step extra hard. If you want this rustlin' to stop, I'll stop it; but I'll stop it my own way. Yo're too gentle an' fearful of hurtin' feelin's of mebby a couple of innocent fellers. Me, if I hurt the feelin's of any innocent hombres, why I says they deserve the hurts for hangin' out with the gang I'm after. Now, then: if you want me to stop the rustlin', say so, stand back, an' let me do it. I ain't through experimentin' with that Mesquite Jenkins."

"What you mean? An' why are you so cussed sweet on that cold-blooded bobcat?"

Hopalong's face softened a little, and he took a moment before answering.

"I ain't trainin' Mesquite to step into *my* shoes, Buck," he slowly said. "I'm trainin' him to step in the shoes I hoped my son would some day wear. When William, Junior, died, along with Mary, things looked awful dark. This Mesquite Jenkins, now—but what's the use?" He paused again, his face drawn and its wrinkles seemed to multiply and deepen. "We'll get back to the trail, Buck. I know this Mesquite. He'll get sick of gamblin' houses, hash houses, crooked games, an' worse wimmen; an' he'll rustle up here an' mebby try to get me to go off with him some'ers. He'll be restless, an' itchin' to do somethin' excitin'. Remember, Buck, that there's one thing he ain't learned yet: respect for the law. I'm aimin' to plant the seed in his soul an' watch it grow. When he comes back, I'll whisper in his ear, an' off goes the blast I've been savin' up."

Buck, who had been shown a great light as to the real connection between Hopalong and Mesquite, stroked his chin reflectively. He glanced sidewise at his thoughtful companion and spoke.

"I ain't thinkin' so much about Mesquite, Hoppy, as I am about somethin' else. What do you mean about them four names?"

"Bein' a hell of a deppity, mebby I don't mean nothin'!" retorted Hopalong. Then he grinned, and hitched up the Colt twins lying against his thighs. Somehow they felt very good, very comforting; and he knew, in a flash, that he never would be content to sit in the shade and whittle until he was too decrepit to do anything else. He shook his head. "No use, Buck: I ain't the whittlin' kind. An', anyhow, Red pesters

me near to death, askin' how *gran'pa* is every day, an' should he get me his wife's shawl. Wants to know what kind of wood he'll make my cane outa, an' if I want a straight or a crooked handle on it. Cussed pest! He can't even look at me without grinnin'! For a plugged peso I'd wrap him around his saddle horn!"

"You let Red alone!" sternly warned Buck. "You know he ain't plumb over that gunshot wound he got down in Laramie!"

Hopalong slid from the table, retrieved his hat, and wandered toward the door. "You ain't fat, Buck; yo're *hog* fat, from the hat clean down to the water mark on yore neck."

Buck snorted. "I admit it! I come near bustin' into tears of joy when I saw yore faded red head comin' up the trail! Like an old fool, I says to myself: Hoppy's home ag'in, an' everythin' will get plumb straightened out; an' all you did was to set in the shade an' whittle! If it'd been Tex, now——! But what about them four names?"

"Huh! Tex's married; he'll be gettin' fat, too, under the hat. Got any more insults for me before I go down to Twin River on business?"

Buck's brains either were not as fat as he claimed they were, or they were only fat in spots. He grinned, looked quizzically into the eyes of his old and best friend, and then began looking around for his own hat.

"Wait, Hoppy, till I find that damn sombrero, an' I'll ride down there with you."

Hopalong did not bat an eye.

"Ain't no use of us both goin'," he replied. "If

yo're goin' down, you can get me some smokin'—an' I'll set around an' whittle."

"Where's that damn hat?" demanded Buck, getting red in the face. He glanced at his sober and innocent friend. "You can't fool me, Hoppy! Don't you ever forget that I cussed near raised you. Yo're goin' after them four; an' I'm goin' after 'em with you!"

"If you start to Twin River, you start alone," retorted Hopalong. "You set tight, right here on the ranch. Can't you understand that I'm millin', waitin' for the Kid to come back?"

"An' can't you talk for five minutes without draggin' in that Kid?" snorted Buck, with spirit.

"No more'n you could, ten years ago, without draggin' me in," rejoined Hopalong.

Buck looked squarely at his old friend.

"Hoppy, I'm takin' back that remark. Also, I'm admittin' that I can't talk for more'n five minutes *these* days without draggin' yore name in. If you can make a human bein' out of that cold-blooded cub of a Mesquite you won't find me standin' much in yore way. An' if you can make the man out of him that you've made out of yoreself, you needn't apologize to nobody. You go on down to Twin River, an' get yore tobacco, an' *get it yore own way*. I'll back up any play you make, an' you know it. Reckon I'm runnin' errands for you? Besides, I got that damn account book to straighten out. Who'd ever think a man at my time of life would be keepin' account books an' fightin' figgers? Judas priest!"

"If you'd listen to me, an' write down the figger you

got to carry over every time, you wouldn't have to add the same column over forty——"

"Get out!" yelled Buck, picking up the ink well.

Hopalong passed the gallery on his way to the bunkhouse and heard a low call. He stopped instantly at the well-known voice, and it came to his mind that any man would stop when that voice fell on his ears. Buck's wife, the French Rose: there wasn't a man on the ranch who wouldn't lay down his life for her at need. His hat came off his head, and the smile on his face was like a sunrise, and as innocent. The memory of his own wife was the dearest thing he had.

Rose leaned against the window sill, with exquisite grace putting back a few rebellious hairs that had found an outlawed freedom and were dancing before her wrinkling nose and her sparkling black eyes; eyes that could flash like forked lightning, or become as soft as the waters of a limpid pool at twilight.

"S-h-h-h!" she cautioned, glancing toward the door of the main house. "He will be better now, *non?* He will not worry so an' talk in his sleep, *non?* An' you have been whittling only with your knife, *hein?* You sit in the shade, an' you think an' think; an' then you ride aroun' a little, an' think some more, *non?*"

"Aw," said Hopalong, glancing away from those searching eyes. "Buck was allus all right; but he is a great hand for crossin' bridges when there ain't even a dry wash. He's worryin' over nothin'."

"Ah, *so?*" she inquired. "Do not forget that I have watched you, friend. Watched you when you looked so—so—like *this!*" Her frown expressed con-

centration and anxiety. "You sit an' whittle, an' then you look like that. An' when you come back from your rides you pat those guns. I am a woman. I love my husband. You can't fool me."

Hopalong toyed with a belt buckle, critically examining it.

"Say, Rose; when anybody looks like *that*, it's time to shoot or get scarce. I'm gettin' scarce, *now!*" and he hastened to make his words good, not relishing any session of cross-questioning with the French Rose.

She looked after him, her expression betraying fear and uncertainty; and then she laughed gently and began to hum one of her inimitable French airs. With Hopalong becoming active everything would be all right. Her adored "big man" would grow cheerful again, sleep soundly nights, and all would be well with the Peters household. And there was Red Connors, too, to make the measure of protection overflow.

Hopalong entered the bunkhouse to fill his tobacco pouch from a reserve supply, and found his bosom friend, Red Connors, busily engaged in repairing his saddle, beautifully wrecked in a battle for mastery with a wild three-year-old sorrel. Lanky Smith had done the riding, much to Red's satisfaction; and Lanky had stuck it out despite the saddle.

"Hello, Gran'pa," grunted Red, looking up; and became instantly suspicious because of the beatific expression on his friend's freckled face. "What the hell's makin' you look so cheerful?"

"Goin' down to Twin," answered Hopalong, hunting around his bunk.

To Red this was no reason at all for smiles, and he was about to say so caustically, when the suspicion in his mind became almost a certainty. "Tired of whittlin'?" he asked, hurrying his fingers with their mending.

"Tired of whittlin' an' near through thinkin'," growled Hopalong, searching over the same ground for the third time. "Can't wait for the Kid much longer—*where'n hell's that tobacco!*"

In his haste Red pricked his finger with the needle, swore absentmindedly, and worked all the faster.

"Got anythin' to go on?" he asked, as casually as he could, hoping to delay the departure of his friend as long as possible.

"Cayuse," grunted Hopalong, regarding him suspiciously.

"Aw, you know what I mean!" retorted Red, uneasily. The needle was flying.

"Some folks wouldn't reckon I had—— *Hey,* Red! When are you goin' to buy some tobacco for yourself?"

"I buy more tobacco than any man in this locoed outfit!" indignantly rejoined Red, furtively and hurriedly shoving a sack farther down in his hip pocket. "What you figger on doin' in Twin?"

"I'm aimin' to buy me some smokin'; an' I'm goin' to buy me a little trunk, with a good lock, to keep it in. You mebby buy more tobacco than any man in this locoed outfit, but I'm damn shore you don't smoke none of what you buy. *That's* what I'm goin' to do down in Twin!"

"Yo're a red-headed liar!" politely retorted Red, sticking his finger again. "Yo're goin' gunnin' for

somebody! Don't you reckon I can read yore signs after all these years? You wait, an' I'll go with you."

"You!" jeered Hopalong. "You ain't all healed up yet from goin' gunnin' in Laramie!"

"Who said so?" pugnaciously demanded Red, the needle poised in air.

"*You* did!" replied Hopalong, walking slowly and carelessly toward his bosom friend.

"Yo're another!"

"It was only yesterday that cookie asked you, as long as you was passin' the storehouse, to tote him in half a bag of potatoes," explained Hopalong, cheerfully. "*I* heard what you told him, you pore invalid." He leaned down swiftly, jerked the tobacco sack from Red's hip pocket, and was through the door in two jumps. Red dropped the saddle and went in hot pursuit, with remarkable agility for a wounded man; but he got to the door in time to see his friend wheel and lope in the direction of Twin River, driving Red's horse ahead of him. Red's remarks were plain, hasty, and loud, and while he paused for breath he caught Hopalong's jeering reply.

"That so? It's got my initials on it, anyhow!"

Red scratched his head and went on the defensive, not quite certain of his ground. He remained silent under this evidence of ownership of the tobacco, but he flayed himself for not having paid more attention to details: he was not at all sure that there were any initials on the sack, but he was in no position to argue the matter. Down the trail, his friend was laughing in great good humour: there were no initials on the sack

and there did not have to be. He now was in no doubt whatever as to the real ownership of the tobacco.

Red kicked up a puff of dust and went back into the bunkhouse, but as he picked up the saddle he was struck by a brilliant thought; there was nothing whatever the matter with Buck's saddle, and it would not take him long to borrow Rose's or Buck's horse. A few moments later he slipped around the side of the corral, his greedy eyes on the worn saddle lying across the rail. He heard Buck's voice in a low and harassed murmur, and grinned at his good fortune: when Buck was adding up a column of figures his concentration made him oblivious to all else. Red's eager hands grasped the sixty pounds of Cheyenne workmanship and he whirled to make his escape; but he dropped the saddle to the ground and grinned through a flush which could be seen even through the coats of tan.

". . . four, an' carry six . . . four, an' carry six . . . *Hey*, where you goin' with that saddle?" roared a stentorian voice from the house, and Buck reached the door simultaneously with the last word.

"Want to borry it to measure the length of the stirrup leathers," explained Red. "I'm puttin' new ones on mine."

"Then what was you stalkin' it for?" demanded the sheriff of Twin River County. "You shore had me scared," he sarcastically explained. "I reckoned mebby some Blackfeet had jumped the reservation, an' you was goin' out after 'em. You wasn't aimin' to ride it down to Twin, was you?"

"Aw, *take* the damn thing! I wouldn't ride it no-

where, nohow!" growled Red, kicking the inoffensive article.

"Not while I'm nowhere 'round, you won't!" retorted Buck, starting out to pick up his treasure. "If you'd quit playin' poker with Hoppy an' the rest you could afford to buy a new saddle for yoreself. You ain't got the sense of a prairie dog."

"Oh, *ain't* I?" demanded Red, stopping and wheeling.

"No, you ain't, an' you know it!" shouted Buck. He choked and put the saddle on the ground again. "You wave a pack of cards under a prairie dog's nose, an' see him duck."

Red was about to retort and start an argument, but he pictured the actions of a prairie dog with a man trying to get near enough to wave anything under his nose. He kicked a puff of dust with each foot, swore under his breath, and scowled.

"Any idjut knows that!" he snorted. A curious sound made his scowl deepen, and he writhed as he saw his esteemed boss drop limply on the saddle and wipe his eyes on a sleeve. "Huh! That wasn't so damn smart!" Receiving no reply, he hazarded a question. "What's gran'-pa aimin' to do down in Twin?"

Buck sighed, looked up and made two clean streaks down his face by as many rubs. His eyes were still laughing although his face was grave; Buck was a poker player of parts.

"Buyin hisself some tobacco," he grunted.

"Cussed if you ain't a *pair* of liars!" snorted Red.

He whirled and hurried toward the bunkhouse to repair the saddle in the least possible time. He had just remembered that he, too, was in pressing need of tobacco. As he ducked into the bunkhouse and picked up the saddle to study out the fewest possible repairs needed to make it hold together to Twin River and back, the cook stuck his head in through the kitchen door.

"Gimme a hand, Red; I gotta lift the flour barrel up on a box so I can slush the floor."

"Ain't you got no sense?" indignantly demanded Red. "Ain't you got no sense a-tall, askin' a wounded man to strain hisself that-a-way?"

The cook's eyes flashed as he drew back, one hand on the edge of the door.

"*You* ain't a wounded man," he said with great feeling. "*Yo're* just a cross-eyed, —— —— liar!" and the slam of the door shut out any possible retort.

Red sighed happily and began to work on the saddle; there was no place like home, after all. He had been a fool to stay away so long.

## CHAPTER II

### THE AMBUSH

TWIN RIVER, never any too sweet to a discriminating person, had been well weeded shortly after the old Bar-20 outfit had emigrated to its vicinity some years before; but now the town was slowly reverting to type. When Johnny Nelson had left Montana there were great hopes nursed in many a yearning breast; when Hopalong and Red had gone south a year later, there had begun a faint stirring among a certain type of range bum and saloon habitué, and cautious reconnaisances had been indulged in, with a little scattered cattle stealing; but with the going of Tex Ewalt, the time was believed close at hand to reap a harvest on the surrounding ranges. There was no crowding rush, no precipitate plunging across the ranges, for the Double-Y outfit, shorn of its spectacular and more pugnacious units, was still a factor to be gravely considered. The men who were left had not been known, during their residence in Montana, to turn back from a job once begun, and they paid scant attention to hostile powder smoke once they were aroused. The range bums and saloon hangers-on, the less ambitious and offensive of the larger, original gang, had preferred to mark time until thoroughly convinced

that it was safe to collect cattle for furtive drives. Then there arrived in Twin River a galvanizing agent, one Slim Porter, who was not long in learning of the peculiar conditions existing in this county of many cattle. Slim's arrival preceded the return of Hopalong and Red by two months, and he lost no time in organizing a gang and drilling each man of it to play a specified part. His preliminary operations, of a tentative nature, had assayed well. He had his drive routes laid out, his selling agents selected, and was going to make a killing and get away before his own hide had a bounty placed on it.

Slim Porter had known Hopalong Cassidy in the old days. As a matter of fact, Hopalong had been the pressing need for Slim's leaving the far-off southern range and seeking a more healthful locality. Therefore it was with a certain amount of foreboding that Slim learned that he had inadvertently strayed on Hopalong's adopted stamping ground. The first shock of this knowledge had been softened by the further knowledge that Hopalong had returned to the southern range. Slim had made his decision: he would work fast and leave quickly. Then, like a bolt out of the blue, Hopalong Cassidy and an unknown youth had ridden up the trail to town. Slim felt sick, but he soon recovered, and changed his plans a little. He would mark time until he saw what Hopalong was going to do, running off a few cattle from points of the county well removed from the range of the Double-Y. Had it depended on him alone he would have been comparatively safe in his modest and long-range operations;

but three of his men, closely connected to him in the minds of all who knew them, were born gamblers. They had taken chances, and he had been called on either to help them out of their trouble or bring suspicion upon himself by their failures: his hand had been forced.

Hopalong rode slowly into Twin River for perhaps his third or fourth visit since his return to Montana, and his suspicions and observant gaze gave him the impression that the town was backsliding from its precarious and forced position of rectitude. There was an air of secretiveness, hostility, and furtiveness, or his imagination was running riot. On his former visits he had taken care to pay no attention to Slim Porter, and so far as any word or action of his own was concerned he was unaware that such a person as Slim existed; this had been assisted by Slim's preference to remain out of the Double-Y puncher's sight.

Hopalong jogged through the town and across the little wooden bridge which spanned the Little Jill, and turned toward the Why-Not, a saloon somewhat isolated from the rest of the town. As he dismounted before the closed door he was conscious of a flurry within the building, and when he sauntered in, the feeling of hasty movements still persisted in the unnatural attitudes of the inmates. He carelessly nodded to the uneasy crowd and then stopped in his tracks, apparently vastly puzzled as his gaze remained centred on one man. One could see that he was searching his memory for a prompting. Slowly the puzzled look faded and a grim smile took its place. Before him stood "Pecos," now known by the name of Slim Porter.

"Hello, Pecos," he grunted, and then he turned to the bar and talked idly with the man behind it, the cracked and grimy mirror of the back-bar giving him a veiled scrutiny of things behind his back. Sometimes it is useful to give a man plenty of rope; and carelessness often has served a desperate man well, tempting an enemy into waters beyond his depth. Two men, arising, slipped from the building: Slim, himself well in hand, remained seated at the side of a small table. Three others gradually shifted until they were not far from Slim: and this setting of the stage remained unchanged for perhaps three minutes. Then Slim's right arm and hand began a barely perceptible movement; the three near him moved carelessly away and apart. The atmosphere of the room changed almost insensibly, keeping pace with the growth of Slim's desperate determination.

Hopalong turned like a flash, two guns appearing in his big hands. The movement had been so quick that it found the crowd unprepared, their thoughts too self-centred on what *they* were about to do.

"Just practisin'," he explained with a grin, but there was something in his poised attitude that kept every man present from making any mistakes. The stiffness of surprise left the three friends of Slim. They relaxed, let their arms straighten out at their sides, and grinned evilly. Hopalong then gave Slim nearly his entire attention.

"Pecos," he said, slowly and distinctly, "there's a warrant covered with dust layin' in a desk down in Texas. Texas is a long ways from the jurisdiction of

the sheriff of this county, an' we ain't had no word to hold you. That bein' so, I ain't aimin' to try to hold you. Yo're free as a bird; but winter ain't so far away, an' Texas birds spendin' the summer in Montanny shore migrates. Day after to-morrow there's goin' to be a blizzard in Twin River County. It's twenty miles to the east line, twenty-five to the south, an' near forty to the west. You can take yore choice."

His gaze flickered to the other three and his eyes grew hard behind their narrowed lids.

"*Private* drive trails will be covered with ten feet of snow," he told them. "The bunch grass will be covered so deep that the cows will die as they drift. A man should travel light, an' fast. I'm advisin' you three boys to see that Pecos don't get lost in the storm, as he might do if he went alone, an' you all better not come back ag'in to this part of the country. Rustlin' ain't the style up here no more." His lips straightened into a thin, hard line. "Do I hear any remarks?"

There is presumed to be safety in numbers. The crowd did not deny the presumption, but seemed to doubt its application in the present instance. Still, Slim was inclined to argue.

"I was figgerin' on winterin' on a northern range," he growled. "That warrant is outlawed."

"Winterin' shore gets rid of ticks, Pecos," said Hopalong, blandly; "but there's worse things than Texas fever to Texas critters. Cattle itch is one of 'em; the itch for another man's cows. Hot lead is another. I'll be back in a couple of days."

"You takin' any stock in them rumours?" demanded Slim, angrily.

"Seein' as they're coupled with yore presence up here, I dunno," answered Hopalong, smiling thinly. "Still, I ain't takin' them as serious as I might. If I was takin' 'em for gospel, why I might do more than drop a hint for you to get outa the country. I'm just doin' that so there won't be no more rumours."

Slim sneered. He counted himself good in an argument; and he might be able to talk the deputy into granting an indefinite stay.

"You can't chase a man outa the country on nothin' more'n yore say-so," he stated without heat and purely as a matter of logic and law.

"*I* ain't chasin' you, Pecos," reproved Hopalong. "That would be plumb unlawful. I'm just sorta puttin' the idear into yore head; like Red did when he was sheriff, down on the Pecos. Two days from now I'm figgerin' on turnin' in my badge an' slappin' yore face every time I see you; an' I'll see you frequent. I'm just tryin' to do you a good turn an' not prod you into no shootin' match; but you can suit yoreself, Pecos." Again his gaze flickered to the other three. "That goes for you fellers, too. Make yore choice—an' abide by it. So-long, boys; so-long, Ike," he said to the bartender, and departed, sheathing his guns as he reached his horse.

Crossing the bridge, Hopalong headed for the Sweet Echo Hotel, and rode along its farther side, and spurred to the shed in the rear, where he dismounted and ran behind the wood pile at the corner of the kitchen. From

this point of vantage he could see the Why-Not without himself being seen. The front door of the saloon was closed as he had left it, and there was nothing in its vicinity which appeared to be worth looking at; but moving northeasterly across the plain was a cloud of dust, so thin that a casual observer would not have noticed it. It was rapidly receding from the direction of the Why-Not, and years of experience led Hopalong to believe that it was made by more than one horse, strung out in Indian file, their riders cannily keeping the Why-Not between them and the hotel. Present conditions led Hopalong to guess the number of riders as four.

An inquiring voice hailed the watcher, and Hopalong turned his head to see Slick Milligan watching him in frank curiosity.

"What you doin'?" demanded Slick, stepping from the door to see what there was to be seen.

Hopalong straightened up and squinted knowingly.

"Takin' a sight at the weather, Slick," he said.

Slick scratched his head and stepped behind the wood pile to take a sight of his own. He looked at the eastern sky, at the Why-Not, at the bridge, and at the stretching plain.

"Huh!" he snorted. "You don't have to go through all that fumadoodle to know that we're in for another week of dry spell."

"Then you don't figger there's no blizzard comin' before the end of the week?" inquired Hopalong, hopefully.

Slick seemed to swell up. His mouth opened, but

could not at once form the words. For a moment he stood silent and staring, and then he grunted profanely.

"Blizzard? Blizzard, hell! Come on in an' take somethin'; *hurry up!*"

Hopalong looked searchingly at the sky, shook his head in a settled disbelief, and followed the hurrying bartender into the hotel. From behind the bar Slick was waiting for him with much unconcealed anxiety, and he pushed a liberal glass of brandy toward his friend, the deputy.

"Git that into you *pronto*," commanded Slick. "Then set down here an' rest. That sun's enough to knock *anybody* out." He wiped off the bar with fierce energy, and mumbled to himself: "Blizzard—in August —my Gawd!"

Two more drinks of brandy confirmed Slick's unbounded confidence in this liquor as an unfailing remedy for 95 per cent. of the human ills. His patient recovered miraculously after the first drink, but was given two more doses for safety's sake.

"Whaur's Sandy the noo?" mimicked Hopalong, after smacking his lips the third time.

"Dinna ken," chuckled Slick. "Mayhap doon to Wayback waitin' to see the tr-rain coom in." He slicked his oiled hair and asked a shrewd but innocent-appearing question. "What's Buck doin' these days?"

Hopalong looked frankly into the bartender's eyes. He could trust Slick Milligan without the shadow of a doubt.

"Settin' back, feedin' out plenty of rope, accordin' to the old sayin'."

"Buck believe in old sayin's'?"

"He knows what he's doin'."

"Every man does things his own way," commented Slick, thoughtfully. "Yore way, now, is more from the shoulder." It was almost a question.

"More from the hip," corrected Hopalong. "I've done started somethin' this mornin'; an' meanwhile my iron's gettin' hot for the brandin'. There's another sayin'—about walls. How's business?"

"Fair, though Sandy groans an' talks about bankruptcy. Where'd you pick up that Mesquite Jenkins kid? He makes me shiver. Don't know as I like him a hull lot. Good friend of yourn?"

"Yes," replied Hopalong, uncomfortably conscious that Slick's dosage had been nothing if not heroic. "If you'd seen what I have you'd shiver a lot more. The Kid's all right if you let him alone."

"You don't have to tell me to let him alone," growled Slick, again smoothing his hair. "Seen Slim lately?" He leaned over to pick up a burned match from the floor, and eyed it speculatively before painstakingly tossing it into a sand-box cuspidor.

"Better say good-bye to Slim, an' say it quick," answered Hopalong, lazily arising. His legs gave the faintest possible suggestion of yearning for independence from team work, and he flexed them, shook his belts to a more comfortable fit, and turned toward the rear door. "I'm ridin' on. Tell Sandy I'm comin' in soon for a game of penny ante with him." He laughed reminiscently. "He shore can find more sorrow in penny ante than most folks can in table stakes. A good

game of stud-hoss, or a big game of draw would just about kill Sandy. Well, so-long."

The August sun blazed down on a seemingly arid plain of gravel, sand, and clay, the crowded clumps of the brown and withered bunchgrass giving the appearance of hopeless desolation. To tenderfoot eyes it did not seem possible that cattle could exist on this scorched upland prairie; yet herds grew surprisingly fat on the cured tufts. The rolling swells stretched southward as far as the eye could see; on the east and the west two dark green lines, abrupt and definite, marked the diverging courses of the Jill and the Black Jack, and along the headwaters of these streams the greenery merged insensibly into the timber growth on the bases of the hazy mountains, tinted by the shimmering atmosphere into colours they did not possess.

Hopalong forsook the longer and pleasanter river trail and wagon road for the saving directness of the short-cut, impassable for wagons; and had he looked behind him toward the town, he might have seen a thin streamer of smoke climb upward near the Why-Not, change into two big balls of smoke, and die out. He rode as the crow flies for the ranch, following a well-marked path as straight as a plumb line until it reached the ravine of the Bull, a small tributary of the Jill, which flanked the plain on the east. The Bull was now only a trickle, meandering along the bottom of a steep-sided ravine. This ravine followed and cut through the middle of a high, wide ridge which ran between two flanking strips of swamp and slough, and its genesis would have baffled an observer not well

acquainted with prairie lore. By all rights the ridge should have remained intact, and the course of the Bull should have lain through one of the sloughs. This freak of nature had provided endless arguments until the mystery had been solved by an old plainsman and buffalo hunter.

For generations the vast herds of buffalo had used this firm ridge between the treacherous swamps on either side for their road to and from fords of the Jill and the Black Jack. Literally tens of thousands of sharp hoofs had cut through the firmer bond of the top soil and turned it to dust, which the busy winds had carried away. Heavy rains season after season had poured along this weakened line, cutting steadily deeper into the softer soil beneath, and scoured it ruthlessly, carrying it farther below the level of the surrounding ridge and then below the level of the encircling plain, until it now lay, a deep and established water course, kept alive during the summer by seepage from the flanking swamps. Like all such ravines, its banks were sheer, and the trail had been forced to enter it along another deepened buffalo path which struck it almost at right angles. In the spring it was swimming water, and Buck had threatened to bridge it, and thus gain a direct and short wagon road from the ranch to the town; but so far his threats had been harmless.

Hopalong pulled the little Texan pony to a more reasonable speed as they entered the boulder-strewn approach to the ravine. Almost instantly the prairie arose above his head, while before him the narrow, twisting trail pitched sharply downward. On both

sides of him the insect orchestration lulled with his passing, to swell into its full strength when he had gone by. In this trench-like passage there was not a breath of air stirring, and the sun scorched pitilessly. He wiped the sudden perspiration from his face with a sleeve and laughed outright at his weather predictions.

"Look out for the blizzard," he warned his horse, holding it from a stumble. As he leaned back with his weight on the reins something mottled flashed past his chin, to fall, twisting and writhing, beneath the horse's hoofs. The shrill rattle sent the pony into a panic and it leaped sidewise, struck the wall of the wash, and then bounded down the steep trail in blind terror. Almost unseated by the unexpected jump, Hopalong tightened his knees and fought the crazed animal; and as they bolted across the trickling Bull, the ravine was filled with ear-stunning gunshots. The pony, suddenly relieved of its burden, leaped up the zigzag path along the farther bank, raced for a few hundred yards across the plain, and then calmly fell to cropping the plentiful bunchgrass.

Down in the bottom of the ravine the Bull backed up against the sudden obstruction across its course and murmured with relief as it flowed around the fleshy barrier. Hornets and yellow-jackets, angered by the disturbance, hovered over the inert body, and then, reassured, settled back to their cool, moist clay. Bolder insects took up their fiddling and soon the chorus arose to its full strength. Above the ravine there came the sound of trampling hoofs and then the swift diminuendo of rhythmic pounding. The gray-white smoke

fringing the top of the bank like fog mists on a mountain-top dissipated, torn this way and that by the breeze of the upper level. The swift uproar of the sudden tragedy had died, and the ravine was silent again, save for the insistent humming and rasping of its insect inhabitants, and the hushed murmur of the waters of the Bull, now slightly tinted with crimson.

## CHAPTER III

### FOUR NAMES

RED CONNORS, his saddle mended enough to serve him, climbed over the bars at the corral and dropped his rope on a black gelding which had just been wrangled, and in a few minutes Red was loping along the Twin River short-cut. The black swept on with powerful stride, freer, longer, and easier than the tied-in gait of a Texas pony, stringing the trail behind it and sending the heated air whistling past the rider's ears. Ahead lay the narrow, ribbon-like path, winding through small clumps of trees which fringed an occasional pool that now was no more than a patch of caked mud; angling up the sides of the steeper ridges, to run straight over the intervening level stretches. At length appeared a low, rugged line against the flat prairie beyond it, where the Bull meandered through its cut-bank ravine. Something moved against this ridge, and Red idly noted it, and then sat erect. It looked like a grazing horse, and it looked as though it was saddled. The black leaped convulsively as the spurs bit in, and broke into a gallop.

"Judas priest!" growled Red. "That's *Hoppy's* horse! G'wan, you damn earthworm: hit it up!" The black did the best it could, which would have

satisfied a less impatient rider, but to the man standing in the stirrups and leaning far forward it was not enough. He flashed past the grazing pony, his eyes darting every way over the plain; but he did not waste time up here on the level: all his interest lay in the ravine of the Bull.

It was customary among even the best riders to go down that northern bank at a walk and to ride alertly; but one glance into the ravine sent all Red's caution to the winds, and the black took the steep and treacherous descent on his bleeding rump, having lost his balance at the first drop.

Red sprang from the saddle, anxious solicitude turning his face into a graven prayer; but one close look drove a curse from him like a convulsive squeezing of a bellows, and the graven prayer turned instantly into the hideous gargoyle of murder. He whirled, Colt in hand, and searched the secretive rim of the ravine through eyes shot with red, blazing with blood lust and filmed with tears of rage and anguish. The first paroxysm of blind rage gave way to sanity and the need for speed. He sheathed the gun, swung the inert burden on a sloping shoulder, and somehow gained the level plain, the torn rump of the gelding bobbing and scrambling ahead of him. He never clearly remembered that race to the bunkhouse; it haunted him for years as a vast stretch of crimson fog, interminably long, damnably unreal.

His shout was not needed. Figures scurried like ants from the bunkhouse, the ranchhouse, and the corral, to investigate that racing black and its double

burden. The riders strung out according to the speed or perversity of their horses. From the rear of the dust-raising procession a chestnut poem of motion crept up and passed horse after horse; its rider's arm rising and falling, the whistle of the quirt lost in the roar of the wind. Not a sound left the rider's tight-pressed lips; but his eyes glittered like those of a pitiless hawk. Mesquite Jenkins had come back.

The chestnut swung as though on a pivot, the frantic hind hoofs scoring the hard-packed trail, the flailing forelegs searching the tenuous air for a purchase to aid balance. By a miracle of unconscious horsemanship the chestnut alighted on all-fours, half a yard from the straining black, and kept pace with him. Now horse after horse stopped, swung, and joined the racing pair, profane shouts of inquiry turned to the dangerous mutter of vengeance. One crisp command rang out above the turmoil, and instantly an obeying rider shot from the group to break all records to Twin River and the doctor.

"Where'd you find him, Red?" snarled a voice ordinarily cold and calm. "Damn you, *answer* me!"

"On the trail across the Bull, Kid," growled Red, and then, wonderingly, saw the face of another man pop up before his eyes. Mesquite Jenkins, back from his wanderings, had dropped from Red's sight like a shrike from a tree-top.

Doctor Judd, gently closing the door behind him, glanced around the ring of tense faces in the outer room. Behind him came the French Rose, her limpid

eyes like pools of water overflowing. She struck the tears from her long, black lashes and smiled bravely through the mist, her quivering lips bitten until they bled. To her side came Red Connors' wife and put an arm around her.

"Don't you fear, Rose," she said, her own lips trembling. "He ain't goin' to die: we won't let him!"

The doctor cleared his throat.

"Havin' the constitution of an ox," he said, "he's got a fightin' chance; an' he's a fighter. Buck, fix me up a blanket on the floor somewhere. I'm aimin' to make this my office for a few days." He looked again at the circle of faces, each one a study in growing hope. "Is Mesquite Jenkins here? No? I'm sorry, for Cassidy's callin' for him. If he comes, send him right up here to me. Buck, before you fix that blanket, go in an' see him: he's got somethin' on his mind, an' he won't stop frettin' till he gets it off. The rest of you boys clear out," he told them kindly. "We don't want no noise around the house. Mrs. Connors, will you take Mrs. Peters's place for awhile, so she can rest a little? I want her to sit up nights."

He motioned with his hand and man after man silently filed through the door, some of them groping a little, which might have been caused by the gathering twilight; but once outside, their purpose lost all uncertainty. Man after man ran from the bunkhouse, loaded down with rifle, blanket roll, and canteen; the swearing cook bungled in his eagerness to pass out food suitable for men in the saddle who would have little time for cooking. He cursed monotonously, bemoaning the

fate which had made him a cook instead of a rider of the range.

Buck pushed into the busy group at the horse corral and checked their activities, speaking harshly to hide the ache in his heart. Out of consideration for the wounded man's ambitious temperature, Buck had made a promise that was gall and wormwood to him; but, having made it he was going through with every word of it. Hopalong had made him promise to keep the outfit riding range to protect the cattle, and to leave vengeance to him or to Mesquite. If he died, then they could do what they pleased. Now Buck argued, heated replies to his words slowly giving way to sullen ones, and he knew he would win, but the argument was to run a long time before he was to receive their definite promises. The friends of Hopalong Cassidy did not take kindly to being called off the war trail: it was against their natures and their training, and but for their habit of obedience to Buck, a habit strengthened by many years, his words would have gone for naught; and as things stood it was a toss-up for awhile whether or not they would obey.

Down from the north in the deepening twilight rolled a swiftly moving cloud of dust, the wind intermittently opening and closing it, and intermittently revealing Slick Milligan's pride in horseflesh; but the rider was not Slick Milligan. The sullen and mutinous crowd at the horse corral looked curiously at this skimming newcomer, and soon his identity was guessed at.

"Mesquite!" grunted Red, still smouldering in the fires of his rage. After a moment's intense scrutiny

he spoke again. "Left the chestnut at Sandy's, and borrowed Slick's bay." He raised his voice: "What'd you find out, Kid?"

Mesquite pulled up and stopped among them, swinging from the saddle as the horse turned.

"Lost their trail in the river," he growled. "Not bein' able to pick it up till daylight, I went down an' swapped with Slick an' come up to find out how bad Hoppy's hurt. How—how is he?"

"Doc says he's got a fightin' chance," answered Buck. "He wants to see you right away *pronto!*"

"All right; but before I go I want to warn you to keep this bunch ridin' range," hurriedly said the youth. "Looks like a range war. Heard enough in Twin River to make me figger they're plannin' a raid on you. With Hoppy laid up they're thinkin' it's mebby safe. Tell you more in a minute," and he whirled to run to the ranchhouse.

Mesquite stood in the big outer room, his hat in his hands and his heart in his eyes, hypnotically watching the door through which the doctor had just slipped. The expression on his face would have justified a plea of self-defense by any man who had seen it and acted reflexively. The door opened again and the doctor's hand reached out and beckoned. Mesquite passed silently into the little room, nodded to Mrs. Connors with his gaze on the eager and burning eyes in the face against the pillow.

The pale lips moved and the youth stepped close and bent down until his ear was almost against them, holding his breath to aid his hearing; and the names of four

men burned into his memory like a sizzling iron into the hide of a steer. He nodded and arose, and then hesitated as he was about to slip out. Hopalong was trying to tell him something with his eyes, trying desperately. Following their repeated glances, Mesquite saw the wounded man's twin Colts sagging their broad belts from a large nail in the wall. Pointing at them, he looked at their owner, and at the sudden light in the staring eyes a thrill went through him. Casting off his own belt and gun, he took down the worn forty-fives and slung the belts around his waist. A few deft touches made them set snugly, and he turned a determined face to the pain-racked countenance on the pillow, over which a contented smile was now flickering. The youth nodded and backed swiftly from the room, dashing a hand across eyes that had not been moist for years, and ran almost blindly for the corral and Slick Milligan's bay.

Back in the room he had left, the smile on Hopalong's face was growing softer and his eyes were closing. Doctor Judd looked closely at him, and from him to the nurse, and a finger went to his smiling lips. The nurse nodded, turned down the lamp, and settled into a position she would try to keep without moving as long as her patient slept; and sleep he did, like a child: Mesquite Jenkins had come back and was off to ride the blood trail.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BADGE OF THE LAW

THE group at the horse corral surrounded the foreman, still arguing. Mostly it simmered, but here and there the arguments boiled up strongly, and the foreman's voice was steadily pitching higher and sharper in his replies to his angry and reluctant outfit. His lowering gaze was fixed on the ranchhouse door behind which lay his old friend, and the outfit's friend, grievously wounded. The door opened, framed a moving figure against the yellow lamplight, and closed again. Hurrying footsteps came nearer and the group moved uneasily, their protests momentarily ceasing. Mesquite Jenkins pushed through the little ring of scowling men and stopped at the foreman's side, his hands slipping under the heavy holsters and holding them out and up for the crowd to see.

"Hoppy gave me his guns an' the job you want," he said, his voice icy. "It's a one-man job, an' it's *mine!* What's more, I'm takin' it. No bunch of mangy coyotes can ambush Hopalong Cassidy an' live to brag about it—not while I'm able to set a hoss or fan a gun. Hear me? It's a *one*-man's job, an' *it's mine!*"

There came a rumble of protest, and he stepped back, facing the group, his eyes glinting.

"Yo're all figgerin' me an outsider," he said, crisply. "Red can tell you that Hoppy's lookin' to me to fill the place made empty when his son died. I owe him a lot, an' I'm aimin' to pay up some of it. I, too, scragged him from ambush, before I knowed who he was, an' this is my chance to square it a little. Layin' on his bed up in that little room that stinks with medicine he called me 'son,' an' his eyes was bright as stars when he said it: an', by Gawd, I *am* his son till this thing is washed out! He told me things, too: all I want to know. What'd he say to you, Buck?"

Buck Peters swore under his breath; but he spoke the truth, and his eyes were moist.

"Said for us to watch our range, an' that you was to go after them skunks as soon as you got back to the ranch."

Mesquite chuckled, but the sound sent a cold shiver up the spines of the crowd and made tense faces tenser. Good as they were, there was not a man of them but was glad that this youth was not on his trail.

"Well, I'm back, ain't I?" demanded the youth. His words became less clipped. "There's no tellin' what's goin' to bust loose on this ranch or in this county. One thing's dead shore: there's a raid planned on Double-Y cattle. Hoppy learned it, *I* know it, an' Slick Milligan knows it. If you boys are itchin' to shoot, you'll mebby get the chance before daylight; an' you can bet that some of them ambushin' dogs will be with the raiders. You may get a crack at some of 'em before I do," he laughed, and again they shivered; "but I'm takin' the main trail, an' I'm ridin' *alone!*"

Again he lifted the holsters to give weight to his words; those two Colts were proof positive that he spoke the truth, and the outfit knew it. He turned to Buck, his voice almost a whisper; but it was like a breath out of the Arctic.

"Slick's hoss ain't as fresh as it was, Buck. Gimme the best animal you got handy, an' some grub. You'll see me ag'in when this thing's all cleaned up. Ambushin' is plumb goin' out of style up here."

"But where you goin' to start, Kid?" asked Red, knowing the other's unfamiliarity with the surrounding country and with its inhabitants.

Mesquite turned frosty eyes on the questioner, and his white teeth gleamed.

"Hoppy told me four names. I'm startin' with *them!*"

"Just the same, it ain't no one-man job, Kid," replied Red, resignedly; "but," his hand reached out swiftly to the youth's shoulder, "I'm admittin' it's a Mesquite Jenkins job. Go on with it, Kid: Hoppy's guns are warrant enough for me, an' for the rest of us," he added, turning to face the outfit. He glanced at Buck. "Make him a deppity, Buck," he suggested.

Mesquite flung off the hand and whirled with the swift grace of a mountain cat.

"I don't want no badge holdin' me back!" he snapped. "*I* ain't countin' on takin' no damned prisoners!"

"When it comes to takin' prisoners, Kid, a deppity has got to use his own best judgment," replied Buck,

who by this time had learned what it was that Hopalong had found in this cold killer that was worth while. "A deppity ain't supposed to git hisself killed tryin' to take a prisoner, an' if a man makes a gun-play it's got to be met, an' beat." He smiled, and was taken a little more into Mesquite's heart. "Hoppy was a deppity, Kid; an' his authority as a deppity sheriff oughta go with his guns." Without knowing it, the foreman had made a ten-strike, and unwittingly had brought a little nearer one of the wishes of Hopalong's heart: to awaken a respect for the law in the soul of Mesquite Jenkins. The law, as Mesquite had found it, was nothing to be proud of or to have any faith in. In the country where he was raised the foundation of law was dirty politics, and the carrying out of legal mandates was done in ways useful to those in power. He had seen honest men framed, and guilty men let off for political reasons, and gradually there had grown in him a well-founded contempt and hatred for the law and its officers.

Mesquite was like a cornered bobcat, faced with the mantle of the law he so cordially hated. To be a servant of that law and to act under its badge of office was a pill too bitter for him to stomach. A retort was shaping in his throat when there flashed to his mind, in answer to the foreman's last words, a phrase enunciated by Hopalong, himself, down in Laramie scarcely a month ago: "My authority runs with my friends." The youth had seen what followed, and now he fought with himself for a moment, and then his eyes glinted from a swift resolve, and his white teeth showed in a sudden smile. Perhaps the law was different up here

in this country, perhaps it was coloured by the men who undertook to carry its mandates into effect. He had come to a step in his evolution which Hopalong, were he well, would not dare force. He, of his own accord, was bridging one more gap in his moral development.

"All right!" he snapped. "If Hoppy could wear the damned thing, then *I* can. Pin it on, swear me in, an' let me go." Under his breath he swore that all his prisoners would make gun-plays, no matter how it was done.

"You can't do nothin' till mornin', Kid," said Buck, taking a deputy's badge from Lanky Smith's vest. Mesquite laughed contentedly as he raised his hand to take the oath, and as he lowered it again it rested for a moment on the shoulder of the foreman-sheriff, and part owner of the Double-Y.

"Can't I?" he demanded, exultantly. "I can stuff hell before mornin' if the breaks are anywhere near right; an' I'm goin' down now to force the breaks. I told you before that ambushin' is goin' out of style up here, an' goin' out damn fast."

Someone in the crowd had led up a horse, and willing hands had put Mesquite's saddle on it, which was tacit consent to his single-hunting. There came a flurry of movement, and the sounds of a swiftly running horse grew less in the night along the trail to Twin River, where rode as wild and savage a servant of the law as ever wore its badge.

Twin River had changed much since the day, not so many years before, when Sandy McQueen had finished

building the Sweet Echo Hotel in almost a virgin and unsettled country. He had crossed the road, admired his pretentious hostelry, and then, with firm faith and blooming optimism, had walked with dignity into the new edifice, there to wait for the coming of the rails up the valley of the Jones' Luck River, and for the swarming homesteaders that would follow them. He was still waiting, but doubts were creeping upon him, to honeycomb the faith which still persisted with Scotch stubbornness. With the passing of the years he had seen the little hamlet shrink and shrivel. The half-hearted gold rush which had come to tide him over had ebbed swiftly; the farms he had dreamed of were now no more than memories, their boundary furrows and firestops rank with triumphant bunchgrass, their hastily built huts falling to pieces. The fort had been abandoned with the passing of the last shadow of Indian menace, the present generation of Indians stolidly accepting the Government's shameful breaking of the treaty. No longer did its supply wagons rumble along the Wayback trail to pause before Sandy's door. His choice of a townsite had been made with a shrewd and canny judgment, based on fact; what he had failed to take into proper consideration was the juggling of a board of directors, politics, and land speculation. The valleys of the Jones' Luck, the Jill, and the Black Jack had been shuffled out in favour of a territory farther west, where the powers behind the railroad had bought thousands of acres of poor land for a song; and it was through this latter valley that the branch line railroad had been run. Twin River was dying of dry-

rot, kept alive only by three great ranches, the Double-Y, the Cyclone, and the rejuvenated NM; and ranching interests are ultra-conservative, frowning upon farms and settlers, jealous of activities which threaten to take root in the soil. Aside from other things, they want no double line of fences interposing between the dry and open range and the rivers.

Twin River had changed. One by one the buildings of a busy and optimistic settlement had been abandoned, one by one its inhabitants had left for new fields. The great barroom of the hotel which once had shaken to the stamp of many feet, rung with the sound of many booming voices, now echoed hollowly to an occasional pair of feet; the once-busy kitchen now found Sandy playing cook, with time hanging heavily on his hands; the doors of the dozen bedrooms were seldom unlocked, dust accumulating on the exposed slats of their beds. Gone was the I-Call saloon, but Ike remained, for Ike was one of those who could eke out a fairly prosperous existence if he were not too closely watched, where another man would starve; which often is only a difference in morals. When Dutch Fred, owner of the more pretentious and cleaner-run Why-Not saloon, had taken stock and made ready to leave this part of the country while he had something left to take with him, he had sold out to his competitor across the river and had been seen no more. Ike's tumble-down groggery was burned by its owner lest it give foothold to some new rival, and Ike had taken possession of the Why-Not and added its patrons to his own. As the gray wolves flanked the buffalo, so Ike's patrons flanked

the cattle range, alert for pickings on the edges of the herds. They had sure and unquestioning markets for re-branded cattle, for ear-notched yearlings, and even for skins; cattle strayed into the brush of wild draws among the hills; round-ups missed enough in the wilder parts of the country to keep this pack of coyotes from seeking other fields. So they had remained to prey upon the country roundabout and, in time of famine, to prey, snarlingly, upon each other.

## CHAPTER V

### A GOOD BEGINNING

A FAST-RIDING horseman on the trail along the Little Jill reduced his speed when the lights of the town could be seen from the top of a rise. They made a sickly yellow showing through the darkness, some of them very faint because of unwashed windows: a pitiful reminder of Twin River's better days. He went on at a canter, and then slowed to a walk as a black bulk in the night loomed up before him on a bend of the trail. This was the last sizable piece of cover to be found between him and the town, and here he dismounted, picketed his horse in the copse, and went on afoot. In his memory, cherished by vengeful hatred, were four names; in his mind, sharply pictured, were four faces; in his soul there burned a steady, unwavering fire of determination. There had been more than four men mixed up in the ambushing of his friend and mentor, for he had read the signs along the top of the fateful ravine, and believed the number to have been a dozen. He was glad that he had spent a few days with Hopalong before pushing on again, for in that limited time his friend had pointed out many of the denizens of this country, and to the more disreputable of them had coupled shrewd observations and fragmen-

tary bits of history. Four names, four faces, out of a dozen, and in a country strange to him. He growled in his throat as he pushed on in the star-bright night toward the unsavoury Why-Not, as inflexible in his purpose as a wolf on the trail of a kill.

The saloon was dark, except where thin strips of radiance faintly marked out the rectangles around the closely drawn curtains or leaked around the stops of the closed doors. Here congregated, when it was safe, the lower element of the town's fixed and transient population, watching doors and windows, and watching each other.

In the old days of unchecked personal freedom, when a reasonably clever man needed little else than a horse, rope, and running iron to lay by a store sufficient to see him through a Montana winter, the Why-Not had been a famous rallying place, whence had gone many a well-planned raid. Those happy days had gone with the coming of a tight-lipped, close-lidded breed that had ridden up from Texas; a breed as tough and tireless as the whalebone ponies it rode; a breed that had faced and solved far knottier problems under that far-away southern sun than Twin River could offer for solving. These grim newcomers had shocked the local scourings both in deeds and in ways of thinking. That men would ride nearly a thousand miles, and be eager and ready for fighting at the end of the long, hard trail, and from no other prompting than that of friendship, was something the Why-Not's evil brood could not understand. The latter's idea of friendship was to keep a wary eye on their friends, lest expediency beckon and hatch

out a latent and ready treachery. Misjudging the motives that actuated these Texans, unprepared for madmen with hair-trigger Colts always under deft and ready hands, and faced by a group of hard-riding punchers who were singularly direct when occasion arose for directness, and who laughed at danger and sneered at Death, the brood had melted like snow before the Chinook. Since then the seasons had rolled around and around, and newcomers had floated to the Why-Not and settled there like water-logged drift in a stagnant backwater of effort. But hope springs eternal, and now its beacons were rising in the night, promising an enticing affluence with a modicum of danger.

To-night there had been an eager rallying in the Why-Not, and out of the darkness single horsemen had ridden up to the rear door, following one another closely. They had been called together by the promise of a feast in a time of famine. The master of that Texan breed had been slated to die in ambush that very afternoon; and the fact that no word had come from the ambushers was assurance that there had been no failure. Hunched over sloppy tables, heads close together, the Why-Not gang breathed questions and surmises as they inhaled the pungent fumes of Ike's vile liquors in the generous glasses under their noses.

Hopalong Cassidy, they told themselves, had been shot down; Hopalong Cassidy, the canny leader of the Double-Y pack. Johnny Nelson and Tex Ewalt, the next most feared, were miles away, leaving lesser lights to avenge their leader and to protect their

cattle. Of the remaining pack, Buck Peters, sheriff of the county, was believed to be too old, too easy-going to give much trouble; an old warrior slowed by time and easy living. Red Connors, always far better in direct action than in strategy, would ride and fume and sputter in vain. The others were still lesser warriors, although dangerous enough when Hopalong led them. They would run in circles, making harmless noise and barren dust clouds. The cycle of the lean years had reached its end, and the swing was starting back again; there lay the almost helpless range, pleasantly covered with sleek and heavy cattle, ready money in any market; one well-planned raid would repay amply for the long and hungry wait. The raid only awaited the arrival of a single courier, and was so well-planned that nothing could interfere with it—one of the compensations for a mediocre intelligence is an enrichment of animal cunning, and in this operation cunning had yielded up its best. Once started, the raid could not fail. The fiery and revengeful nature of that Double-Y outfit had been given full consideration. It would not resist following the trail of the murderers of its leader, and thus would leave defenseless the cattle on the range.

One-Eye leered across the smoke-filled room, his words slipping unctuously from a corner of his twisted mouth. One-Eye was something of a celebrity, rumour saying that it was he who, years before, had driven itch-infected cattle from the Cyclone ranch across the river into the herds of the Double-Y. Death had surged

like a prairie fire across the latter's range and had taken a bitter toll.

"They was to send us word when they was ready," said One-Eye. "We oughter be gittin' it right soon. To-night's the night for the big play, whatever we can clean up later. Time's flyin', an' there's shore a-plenty to do before daylight. I'm beginnin' ter wonder if they aims ter freeze us out?"

"How can they skin us, if they make the trail for that mad outfit ter foller?" asked a companion. "We was given the job of makin' the sweep an' the furst part of the drive. It's us as can skin them, if we're a-mind ter."

One-Eye glared at the speaker.

"S'posin' somethin' happened that gave 'em a chanct to change their plans?" he demanded. "You don't reckon they'd think of us, do ye?"

"Mebby they failed," suggested another. "Mebby Cassidy didn't ride straight acrost the range, but changed his mind an' follered along this side of the Bull, or struck acrost ter the trail along the Little Jill. He might 'a' changed *his* mind, after we'd signalled."

One-Eye sneered.

"Then they'd be settin' right here with us this very minute, cussin' their luck, an' plannin' fer to-morrow."

"Mebby they tried, but didn't git him cold," said yet another, his face swiftly paling.

One-Eye laughed sarcastically.

"If they'd showed their hand, an' blundered, we'd 'a' seen every mother's son of 'em a-bustin' all ridin'

records gettin' outer the country: an' we'd 'a' had some damn mad visitors long afore this!"

"Shore as shootin'!" grunted the proprietor, emphatically. The mere thought of such a calamity made gooseflesh on him.

"But we should 'a' heard by this time if everythin' went all right," growled a man in a corner. "They've had time to lay that trail, split, make a get-a-way, an' reach the place we agreed on. I'm givin' 'em half an hour longer. If they don't lèt us know by then, I'm pullin' stakes outer this country as fast as my hoss kin run. That's flat!"

The low-voiced discussion ran on, and then Whiskey Jack raised his voice in enlightenment on another subject.

"Who's that yearlin' that come up here with Cassidy about a month back? That youngster that drifted on ag'in after a few days? What was it they called him?"

"Mesquite somethin'," answered the man in the corner. "All slicked up, he was, with polish on his boots. Damn stuck-up dude, *I* calls him."

"Reckon he was some kid they picked up along the trail some'ers, to play daddy to," said One-Eye, contemptuously, spitting at a sand-box cuspidor and making a bull's-eye at ten feet. "Thought a lot of hisself, *he* did."

"Jest the same, I didn't like the looks of him," growled a bum, moving restlessly on his chair. "Had a hell of a cold eye, he did, an' a mean way of lookin' at ye. I was glad when he rode on about his own business."

"Huh!" snorted One-Eye, laughing softly. "He's a muley. He ain't growed horns yet. He couldn't hurt nobody that was a *man*."

"Mebby, mebby," replied the bum, squirming. "Seems ter me as I've heard tell that a young rattler's jest as pizen as an old un. I'm 'spicious of *any* of that gang, or any of its friends." He shifted his cud and squirmed again. "Wish ter Gawd them fellers would send us some news!"

"If they don't let us know purty soon we'll find out what happened an' switch the play on 'em," growled One-Eye, ominously. "If they're playin' us dirt, I'll cussed soon tell Peters where he can find 'em if he wants 'em. Yes, an' lend him a hand in gittin' 'em, too!" He looked around, read approval on the faces of his companions, and slapped his thigh. "I've done it afore, an' I can do it ag'in. One time I can remember allus makes me laugh," and he burst into uproarious laughter as he pictured it; and then his voice trailed into a startled and choking silence, as though it were stuck crosswise in his throat. His hypnotized gaze was on the rear door, and his slack jaw was slacker. To natures attuned to everlasting vigilance for manifestations of danger, this silence was full of menace. Throughout the odorous room there came furtive squirmings, and heads turned swiftly to see what it was that had choked off One-Eye's booming mirth.

The door was closing again, and a step from it, with his back against the wall, stood a cold-faced youth watching the room through icy eyes. He was springily balanced on the balls of his feet, and his hands hung

just above the well-worn walnut handles that jutted out from their battered holsters. On his dusty black vest was pinned the badge of deputy sheriff, its glinting nickel-plate no warmer than his narrowed eyes. He appeared to be suffering from a restrained eagerness, and the guilty consciences in the room interpreted that eagerness each in its own way, and each man reached the same unpleasant understanding of it. Each man felt like a bull's-eye.

"I know four names," said the newcomer, frostily, and sneered at the silence and the rigid postures of the crowd. "Bar-keep, you listen to me; an' keep yore paws in plain sight: you ain't worth nothin' at all to me if yo're dead." His glance flicked about the room. "*You* fellers can do what you please with yore hands, an' the sooner you make some use of 'em the better I'll like it." The cold eyes flashed back to the man behind the bar, whose out-thrust and ham-like hands were the most prominent things about him. "Yore name Ike?" snapped the newcomer.

The proprietor nodded, gulped, and raised a hand slowly, to run a finger around inside the neckband of his shirt, a garment which never before had been too tight for him.

"I dropped in for the names of the rest of the skunks that shot down Cassidy," said the youth, his lips tightening, his face giving a faint and fleeting sign of sorrow. "There ain't nothin' I'd like no better than to turn both of these guns loose right here." He paused while he glanced over the crowd again, almost beseeching it to burst into hostile action. "The sooner

you tell me what I want to know, the sooner I'll be on my way. Who-all was in that litter that ambushed Cassidy this afternoon? *Spit it out!"*

Ike's glance whipped from the smoking lamp on the front wall to the smoking lamp on the rear wall, a prayer expressed by eyes instead of lips, although his lips were moving soundlessly. His friends were either blind or dumb, for no man moved, and the lamps smoked in peace.

"*Spit it!"* grated the deputy, a growl sounding deep down in his throat like the rumble of an angry dog. "If I don't get them names by askin', I'll force 'em loose in powder smoke. Talk, an' talk true, for I'll shoot the man that lies. *Who are they?"*

Through Ike's mind slipped the names of men dead or gone to other localities, and he moistened his lips to give utterance to them. To his mind came Chatter Spence, Argue Bennett, and several others of those freer, richer years. His roving glance and subtle smile apprised his friends that he had not lost his fine art of trickery, and soft breaths of relief arose here and there among the tables.

"I've got four names to check up by, Ike, in case you get careless in yore talk," warned the deputy. "An' what's more, I'm no muley cow; I've growed horns since you saw me last," he added, significantly, his glance sweeping over the room, and for an instant a grim smile flickered at the corner of his thin lips and added to the ripple of apprehension passing throughout the gaping crowd. "I hate a liar: spit 'em out!"

Ike's forehead was wet, glistening in reflected light.

On his face there came an expression of pain, in his eyes a look of desperate determination. That remark about horns was distressingly apropos to the conversation that had been going on: had this man been listening at a window, and if so, how much had he overheard? Again Ike licked his lips and temporized.

"Why do you reckon I know any names?" he asked. "Why do you reckon *any* of us know 'em?"

"I got a feelin' that you do," answered Mesquite, smiling thinly. "If you don't tell me, I'll smoke 'em out, if I has to shoot every skunk in the room. Come on, now: *spit 'em out!*"

As the agonized proprietor was about to speak the words which might serve as the basis of his epitaph there sounded the steps of a walking horse. Ike sucked in his breath in readiness for a warning shout, and found himself staring into a pair of eyes which plainly promised death as the price of utterance. The veins stood out on the proprietor's head and neck, and he clenched his hands; but he wavered, and in the wavering he lost the impetus of his foolhardy recklessness.

The horse stopped at the stable behind the saloon, and hurrying footsteps, made clumsy and heavy by high-heeled boots, approached the door. The deputy's hands dropped a scant two inches, resting on the handles of his borrowed guns. At this motion the crowd sucked in its breath and not even a boot-heel scraped.

"Not a word!" whispered the deputy, partly facing the door, conscious of the agony depicted on the faces of those in the room. He seemed to radiate deadliness from every pore, and pale lights glinted far back in his

peering eyes. The crowd shivered and remained silent.

The door swung inward, and swiftly and carelessly closed again, the momentum of the newcomer taking him three steps inside the room. He was so full of the news he brought, so eager to sound the cue for action, that he looked neither to the left nor to the right, but blurted out his message.

"We got Cassidy cold an' clean, an' everythin's ready in the hills! The trail's laid, an' half of us are waitin' for you fellers an' the drive! Has that damned outfit started follerin'——" He stopped suddenly, for through his eagerness, hammering insistently to break past the wall of his preoccupation, the warning of those strained postures and agonized expressions at last reached his thinking mind, at last aroused his instincts of danger. His head jerked back, his right hand dropped like the strike of a snake, and he writhed sidewise to follow the direction of a dozen fixed and frightened stares. The crash of his gun was doubly loud; its smoke doubly thick; and he twisted back to his former position, arose stiffly erect, and pitched full length across a table.

With the crash of the guns Mesquite had slipped out of the fogging cloud of powder smoke and watched the room, his glittering eyes as cold as the nickel of his badge.

"What's *his* name?" he snapped, and then he laughed suddenly, and the chill of an Arctic frost seemed to pass over the hushed room, constricting hearts and torturing nerves. His half-lowered gun, a thin wisp of

smoke curling from its muzzle, swung up again threateningly. "What's *his* name?"

"Lefty—Trotter," came a sighing whisper from a corner of the room, where a wild-eyed man was gripped by terror.

Instantly the deputy's gun swung on this weak brother, while the second weapon leaped from its sheath and covered the rest of the crowd.

"Gimme the rest of 'em!" he snapped, and the pressure of his lips ran thin white lines to take the place of red. "Out with 'em, or you'll trot with Trotter!"

Chattering teeth macerated the grudged list, making it almost useless; but a few of the names could be understood, and among them was one of the four which Mesquite had hugged so jealously all the way to town.

"Stand up," he ordered, and promptly had his wish.

"Say 'em over again, slow an' plain." While he strained his ears to listen closely he flashed a glance at the proprietor which again balked recklessness. At the last name he turned slightly and faced Ike, on whose countenance was a thunder cloud of wrath. "That right, Ike?" he demanded, and read the truth in the little eyes; but while Ike looked the truth, he denied it in words.

"He's a damn liar!" gritted the proprietor, planning death for the squealer. "Not one name was right!" he shouted, and then flinched as a bullet clipped his ear and sent a tinkle of glass down the mirror behind him. His stubbornness slipped away like water and his knees went suddenly weak. "Yes," he muttered, "he told the truth."

Mesquite ignored him and turned to face the crowd squarely, falling into a crouch behind his poised guns.

"Stand up, hands above yore heads, an' step to that wall—*all* of you!" he barked.

The hasty movements quickly ceased, and the miserable line-up waited for the next command, and when it came, whirled almost as one man to press its collective noses against the rough board wall.

"Ike!" snapped the deputy. "Come out an' take their guns. I'm prayin' you make a misplay."

Ike stumbled from behind the bar, across the room, bumping into tables and chairs, and passed down the line collecting weapons to add to the growing pile on a table. With the dropping of the last gun he turned miserably and looked at the grim deputy.

"String a piece of rope through the trigger guards," ordered Mesquite, calmly. "An' don't take all night, you fool."

Ike returned to the bar, went behind it, and fumbled about under the counter, apathetic with despair. His hand brushed over the loaded bar weapon without hesitation and grasped a length of light rope which lay in a coil in a corner. Shuffling back across the room, he threaded it clumsily as he had been told, and tied both ends together; and again turned to look at the slowly straightening deputy.

"Get that hoss-hair rope from over there," ordered Mesquite, motioning with a gun, and as the proprietor shuffled away the deputy slipped up to the table, shoved an arm through the loop holding the captured weapons and pushed it up on his shoulder. Noisily the collection

swung against his thigh, and he chuckled with grim satisfaction. Then he gave the returning proprietor terse but detailed instructions.

Ike, beginning with the man at the nearer end of the line, ran a loop of the braided hair lariat around each quivering neck and tied a tight and non-slip knot.

When he had finished with the last man he faced the smiling deputy, the remainder of the rope hanging from his hands.

"That's yourn, Ike," said Mesquite, generously. "Loop it around yore neck, an' don't play no favourites when you make it tight, or when you tie the knot. That's somethin' like it, but you oughta pull it tighter for luck: *yore* luck."

Here was a sight to make an observer ache with laughter, but beyond a flicker of humour Mesquite kept his face hard and ominous. Here was a great round-up, a dozen hang-dog jackals, roped in a single line, clumsy feet to climb the heels of those before and to flinch from clumsy feet behind; a baker's dozen, glum and groping, pessimistically dubious as to their end. There they cowered, waiting for the word to march, they knew not where. There stood the valiant, would-be raiders of a supposedly helpless ranch, eager to profit by bushwhacking, ready to leap in and steal after murder had cleared the way; there they stood, the eyes of each on the back of the head in front of him, not daring to look aside, each man picturing the silent figure sprawled across the table; each man writhing under the prickling grip of hair rope around his unwashed neck, and conjuring a ghastly finish to his evil and furtive life. Not

one of them had ever heard of thirteen men being hung at once from a single rope; but there was no solace in this thought, for their captor appeared to be capable of almost any originality; and even if he did not succeed in such an attempt, it was bound to be harrowing, no matter how little it was bungled. In their minds they saw Lefty Trotter, expert gun-man, slowly arising on his toes to plunge across a table. Lefty had started after his gun before the deputy had reached for his own; Lefty was noted locally for his gun-play and his accuracy; yet Lefty, having been given the best of the draw by a shade, had plunged across the table, dead before he touched it. Anything was possible.

"Ike, you lead the way over to Slick Milligan's bar," ordered Mesquite. "The first man that tries to break the line, or get loose, will never live to be hung. You can bet on that." He stepped forward. "Lift yore feet an' march!"

Through the star-stabbed darkness outside the building there moved a snaky, shaky line, stumbling and cursing behind its stumbling and cursing leader, taking for full face value the threat of the following driver. Not a hand raised to touch the chafing, galling rope; not a man thought seriously of attempting to escape. Along the dirt street of Twin River shuffled the baker's dozen, each heart seething with murder. Their heavy feet clomped up the steps of the hotel, and Ike flung open the barroom door with a gesture of consuming rage, and plodded steadily across the floor, parallel with the long counter.

"—— —— ——!" whispered Slick Milligan, dropping

a full bottle of brandy in his haste to get the six-shooter lying under the bar. His gaping mouth was incapable of further speech, and he gripped the weapon with a straining hand.

Sandy McQueen, contentedly dozing in his easy chair in the office across the hall, could have left his seat with no more spontaneity had a bomb exploded under him. His second stride carried him through the barroom door, and he stopped as though he had butted into a stone wall. His mouth clicked shut, his face went crimson, and his honest Scotch eyes blazed with fires of wrath; but before he could loose the bellow that was choking him for utterance he heard a crisp voice bark out from his open front door.

"Halt!"

Slick and Sandy both looked in the direction of this order and saw Mesquite step into sight. The youth walked to the bar and slung his collection of captured weapons on the floor at the end of the counter.

"Keep these for me, Slick," he said, kicking the pile with a foot.

"What in the de'il's name are ye bringin' them bums in here for?" snapped Sandy, fire in his eyes. The veins of his throat and forehead were standing out as he glared from the line-up to Mesquite and back again.

"This is the gang that was waitin' the word to make a raid on the Double-Y," explained Mesquite, leaning easily against the bar and scowling at his prisoners. "All set, they was, to steal a herd. Hoppy's ambushin' was the openin' play. Will you keep these bums for me, Mr. McQueen?"

"Can ye no keep 'em your ownsel' instead o' litterin' up my place wi' 'em?"

Mesquite shook his head. "I've got too much to do to-night an' the next few days. Twelve dogs like these ambushed Hoppy, an' I'm goin' to find 'em."

"Gie ye luck," said Sandy. "An' how's Cassidy?"

"Doc says he's got a fightin' chance."

"Did the murderin' dogs all get away? Did they get away clean?" demanded Sandy, the veins swelling a little more.

"Yes!" growled Mesquite. His eyes glinted and his mouth became hard. "Keep these coyotes till you can get word to Peters to lock 'em up. They've got to be corralled for a few days. Tell Buck to hold 'em till he hears from me. Then he can turn 'em loose; but," he turned to glare at the miserable baker's dozen, "after they get turned loose, I'm personally givin' every one of 'em just an even twenty-four hours to get out of this part of the country before I start shootin' on sight. Tell Buck I couldn't take Lefty Trotter alive; he pulled a gun. His body's out in front of the Why-Not." He raised his arm and levelled it at the weak brother who had called off the names in the Why-Not. "Look at me, you coyote! Where was that other bunch aimin' to meet you fellers an' the rustled cattle? Talk fast an' tell the truth!"

"Crow Valley," muttered the weak brother.

"How was you drivin' for it?"

The detailed route was meaningless to Mesquite until it was explained to him by other prisoners, with Slick Milligan checking up on the statements.

"All right; much obliged, Slick," said Mesquite, his eyes returning to the line-up. "If you an' McQueen will keep these tumblebugs close prisoners till Buck can take 'em over, you'll be doin' Buck an' Hoppy a big favour. I don't want none of 'em loose to ride ahead an' carry warnin's. The job is big enough without them cuttin' in."

"They'll be here for Buck!" growled Slick.

"Ye mean yer goin' after the hull gang by yersel'?" demanded Sandy.

"The whole damned dozen," answered Mesquite, nodding grimly. "The rest of the outfit's got to ride range with rifles across their saddles."

Slick's admiration was obvious, and he joyously waved the six-shooter and glared hungrily at the baker's dozen; and he saw Sandy's coat tails whipping through the door leading to the office, where an eight-gauge, double-barrelled piece of ordnance commonly known as a shotgun, rested across a pair of elk horns hanging on a wall.

Mesquite smiled coldly and again looked at Slick.

"Who was Lefty Trotter's closest friends?" he asked.

"Bill Hoskins an' Tom Short; why?"

"Just wanted to be sure that whimperin' pup told the truth," answered Mesquite, and stepped toward the door. "See you later, mebby," he called from the darkness. He had a job to do before he left town.

There came a smothered rumble from the hall door, where Sandy stood with the ample eight-gauge gripped in his hairy fists, his face like a thunder cloud.

"Now, then, ye de'il's scum," he cried, stalking around

in front of the line-up, "move ower ag'in yon wall, set ye doon ag'in it, an' don't sae much as let a whisper oot o' ye! Move faist, or I'll kick ye to it!" He glared at them as they made haste to obey, and then he walked to the bar and put his back against it, the generous eight-gauge carelessly levelled at his prisoners.

"Slick, ye'll have to ride oop an' tell Peters. I dinna want this mess o' vermin in my hoose nae langer nor I have to. They fair make me squirm!"

"Reckon you can hold 'em till I get back?" asked Slick, more from a loyal anxiety than from any well-founded doubt of his employer's ability.

The reply made him wince, duck, and leap toward the rear door; but he stopped short before a window, looking through it in amazement.

"The Why-Not's burnin'!" he shouted, doubting his eyes.

"An' why not?" asked Sandy. "'Tis an act o' God!" he thundered. "Wull ye mind yer orders an' stoppit standin' there like a fule?" A smile broke through the tense expression on his face. "That Mesquite lad, now: I take it he has gude ideas, eh, Slick?"

Slick turned, nodded emphatically, and once more proceeded toward the door.

"It's a bigger fire than the I-Call made, an' just as purty," he said. "There ain't no wind a-tall an' the river's between us, thanks be!"

"Aye!" growled Sandy, caressing the eight-gauge, and thinking that the passing of his last competitor would do no harm to his dwindling business. "Aye! Thanks be!"

## CHAPTER VI

### TRICKED

THIRTY miles southwest from Twin River ran the grass-grown trail to the "fort," an abandoned government post whose usefulness passed with the passing of the Indian menace. The soil which had so stubbornly resisted the grinding wear of supply wagons, light artillery, and the hoofs of mounted troops now as stubbornly refused to part with the marks of their making. Near Twin River the old trail led over comparatively level ground, the swells long and gentle, some of them with half-mile slopes; but as it pushed on the country became rougher. Escarpments of shale or soft stone arose abruptly a few score feet above the sloping detritus which hid their bases, and rains and winds had played strange freaks of fantastic sculptoring. Clumps of brush and stands of wind-twisted trees began to contest the reign of the ubiquitous bunchgrass and, eventually, dominated.

In the dark a man afoot might have found some difficulty in keeping to the trail; but on this night the man who rode along it left trail-keeping to his horse, which went ahead with no hesitation and covered the miles at a gentle, rocking lope. Three main geographical points were in the mind of Mesquite Jenkins,

jealously preserved in his memory: The fort, Crow Valley, and Big Moose. The first two were rendered actively potential because they were his immediate objectives; the last, a sprawled town located miles to his left, was passive, since it would be a matter of future action in case events led to it.

He could lay no plans, since the trail and the country it led through and to were unknown to him; but known to him were part of the plans of the men he hunted. Earlier in the evening there had been a dozen of these, but now their number was reduced by one; earlier in the evening their plans had been fixed, and polished for smooth, swift work; now they were smashed almost at the beginning and made profitless.

Eleven men, wanted for attempted murder; and by this time it might be that Hopalong Cassidy had died. Whether it was murder or attempted murder made no difference to Mesquite so far as the eleven were concerned. If their volley had entirely missed he would want them just as much. He growled an oath: he was now a servant of the law and his first duty was to take these men alive, if possible; his hands were tied so far as personal vengeance was concerned. If possible: the contingency made him smile. A mile, two miles, passed behind him, and then he sneered; but through succeeding miles he was forced to argue with himself, it being one of the few times in his life that he had felt impelled to justify a course of action. What had happened to him in this northern country? A hand strayed up to the badge and the fingers opened to tear it loose and to hurl it from him; but for a moment they

remained motionless, and then the horse stopped and threw up its head. Like a flash the rider whirled off the trail, spurring to take his mount's thoughts from the scent that had come to it down the wind, to check an inquiring whinny. Sound travels far through the quiet night, and he knew that the trail he had followed was dry and hard-packed, and that away from the trail the soil was softer. After a proper interval he drew up to listen. He heard the low, faint drumming of hoofs above the sounds of insects, unbroken and monotonous. His horse stood like a statue, head turned to the left; and after a moment the rider sent it on again at a walk, circling widely. After a few miles of riding over a country growing steadily rougher he dismounted, picketed the horse, and unfastened his blanket roll, to fortify himself with sleep.

On the trail he had left three horsemen loped steadily northward, bound for an agreed upon rallying point of raiders, eager to scout, to help round up and to drive off a herd of stolen cattle. The sounds of their own horses balked their hearing, and they did not catch the low drumming far up on the trail; the wind, moving even with them, carried no warning scent to the nostrils of their animals; and farther along the trail the tracks of a single horse, coming from the direction of Twin River, were hidden by the darkness. Lefty Trotter had been given time enough to start the second part of the gang on its raid; a false trail had been laid by some of the ambushers of Hopalong Cassidy to arouse the vengeance of the rest of the Double-Y outfit, and by now this outfit, by all rights, should be pounding

in hot pursuit well up in the southern hills, leaving the ranch open for the well-planned raid. This night should be very profitable.

Through the black night rode the predatory three, bound for the junction of Blackfoot Creek and the Black Jack, where a gravel ford crossed the latter and from where age-old buffalo routes led into the wild fastness of the low mountains which fenced in Crow Valley and its only entrance feasible for cows and horses. One man in that canyon could hold off a dozen and give his friends the time they needed to drive a herd to safety; and, instead of one man, there would be an even dozen to spring a deadly ambush and wipe out pursuit. Let the hot and angry outfit of the Double-Y smell a rat and turn from the misleading southern pursuit; let them craftily guess the game and race back to hunt for the trail herd; let them find and follow it, and once again this cattle range would be wide open for despoliation. Crow Canyon and its hidden riflemen would rid the country of the troublesome outfit, and the old days of feasts and plenty would return.

Bill Hoskins, bosom friend of the advance courier, swayed sidewise in his saddle and spoke to Tom Short, bosom friend of both.

"Lefty oughta have that bunch cleanin' up along the Blackfoot by this time," he said in great good nature. "Makes me laugh, thinkin' of them fellers workin' hard for nothin'. They'll be a-plenty sore when we trick 'em, but that's another matter; what I'm thinkin' about right now is cows. There's more cows to the

acre along the Blackfoot than to the square mile on any other part of the ranch. Won't take 'em no time to throw a big herd together an' head it for the ford."

"Lush grass an' salt licks," grunted Tom, mentally picturing the section mentioned. "They'll round up a big herd quick."

"An' scratchy brush ag'in the flies, too," spoke up Dan Slade, the third man. "I'm 'most scared to reckon on how many head we'll rustle off to-night. It don't seem possible, nohow."

Tom Short laughed.

"An' if that fool outfit follers us inter Crow Canyon there'll be even bigger herds run off. Some of you fellers has been figgerin' that Slim was a fool. I'm tellin' you that there ain't a longer head in the country than he packs on his shoulders; not even Shanghai's."

This was praise, indeed, for Shanghai's head was long, and his reputation lay about him almost like a halo, in some minds; but never had Shanghai displayed the perfection in details in his scheming that Slim Porter had revealed; never had Shanghai so expertly fitted together such an intricate puzzle of hours, minutes, miles, and men. Slim's strategy was a beautiful coördination of exquisitely handled factors, in which speed of horse, nature of cattle, miles of trail, and the psychology of men had cunningly been figured and interwoven into a scintillating unit. The blight of an old-time and persistent fear of Hopalong Cassidy having been lifted from Slim Porter, he fairly sparkled with the cleverness of his old-time self, the canny shrewdness and foresight of one of the most successful

cattle thieves of the great Southwest. Once more Slim was in the saddle, riding at the head of a great rustling machine; and it was no fault of his that an unheeding human wolverine had returned unexpectedly and had tossed aside all thought of odds, all fear for self, and had plunged into the intricate niceties of a perfect plan, like an enraged wasp in a spider's web. Slim's knowledge of human psychology had known no such man as this.

Cheerfully through the black night rode the questing three, avariciously exultant, leaving behind them at the fort Shanghai, the long-headed, to keep in touch with the layers of the false trail when these should return according to the plan.

There was little left of the old post to serve as reminder of perilous and strenuous days of the long ago. What the Government had abandoned in the way of timber had been well picked over. Of the enclosing palisades there remained only the unsightly ditch in which they had stood; of the post buildings a few log huts remained, too worthless then for attention, and more worthless now; yet they served, with sundry patchings, to give shelter from the wind and rain. The site of the post was on the apex of a gentle knoll, and the once cleared space was thickly covered with persistently encroaching brush, through which wound several narrow paths beaten out by hoofs. Where the old trail from Twin River came within a mile of the site it pitched down into a rocky and curving ravine, through which it ran before climbing up a slope for about two hundred yards. Dynamically the old post

was supposed to have died, although in some ways it was still alive; geographically, it was but a name, yet it served as a point for strategy and foregathering.

Shanghai, the old-timer, a human coyote grizzled by age and keened by experience, the only survivor of an old-time pack, added a few sticks, carefully selected, to the Indian fire burning before one of the shacks. The dancing cover of an iron pot suspended by a tripod above the flames made innocent music in answer to the escaping steam. The lean face wrinkled in anticipation as his nostrils caught a whiff of the boiling stew, and he pushed a coffee-pot on the edge of the incandescent ashes. Against the wall of the cabin lay a small piece of green hide, the brand cut from a skin freshly stripped from an outlaw steer whose long and independent life far from the herd had been brought to an end by accident. Shanghai, on one of his endless, restless, and suspicious scoutings through the brush, had found the old warrior standing miserably on three trembling legs, the broken fourth distorted by the contraction of muscles no longer opposed by the strength of united bone. Lessons in poverty graduate into instinctive thrift and result in petty gleanings; the hide had a monetary value when delivered to a purchaser, and the almost certain fact of comparatively great riches only a few days away could not blunt Shanghai's habit of saving trifles. Without second thought he had silently killed the steer, expertly stripped off the hide, and then cut out the brand. It was so fresh that the carcass it came from was still warm. He chuckled as he thought of the rest of the

hide, pegged to the rear wall of the other shack: in time the skeleton which had borne it would be picked clean and would be added to his secret and growing pile of bones in a cave of the hills, waiting until need should urge him to pack them to town for an ultimate end in commercial fertilizer. The tell-tale brand would be thrown into the fire when its burning would not offend at mealtime. All things considered it is not strange that of the old gang Shanghai remained. Of all the animals of the wild, the coyote has thrived most under adversity, and increased in a changed environment and persistent hunting.

On the edge of the ravine through which ran the last mile of the Twin River trail a man lay prone, hatless, his face hidden by a clump of grass. His unwavering gaze was fixed on the economical fire and the old man tending it, watching each movement for a sign of other men. The minutes passed and still the watcher lay motionless, reading every gesture of the old-timer. Then he let his gaze pass slowly around the horizon, studying each point in turn. Below him on the trail were the prints of three horses leading toward Twin River, and to his mind came remembrance of the actions of his own horse along that same trail the night before. Wriggling backward, he arose when far enough away from the ravine's rim, and strode to his waiting horse. Reaching it he rested his hand on the stock of the heavy Winchester which protruded from its saddle scabbard. A scant three hundred yards, and no wind that amounted to anything; a fair target, and the name of the four men he cherished in cold hatred. Shanghai,

thought to be one of the four murderous ambushers of the watcher's best friend, puttering about his simmering iron pot, and only three hundred yards away, and if the old man had not been among the dozen that had shot Hopalong Cassidy, he at least was working hand in glove with them.

Mesquite compressed his lips and drew out the rifle, to his mind returning certain words of gun-lore dropped by Red Connors having to do with deception in shooting across a valley. The weapon was almost free from the scabbard when another thought came to the deputy, one of the many that had bothered him during the night. He was a servant of the law and wore its insignia; personal vengeance was to be held in abeyance, and duty called for the taking of prisoners if such were possible. His other hand went up to the vest and unpinned the badge from it. He considered the emblem of law and order, weighing it in his hand and in his soul; and slowly slid it into a pocket while he looked at the Winchester. What the badge and the rifle had in common to be so closely coupled in his mind was known only to Mesquite Jenkins, riding on a trail of vengeance. For a full half-minute he studied the weapon, then frowned, grunted savagely, and came to a distasteful decision. It appeared that the Winchester was not going to be as important on this expedition as it easily might have been. He mounted and rode on again, and again stopped when a break in the hill let him glimpse the smoke a few yards above the fire. Four hundred yards and a perfect rifle shot. Mesquite

unconsciously wetted a finger and held it up to gauge the wind, his other hand dropping against the stock of the weapon; and then he let loose of it, and swore.

"Damn the badge, an' the law!" he growled, his face wrinkling suddenly. "A clean shot at a murderin' cow-thief, an' I can't make it! All right: I'll take him alive!"

Down on the site of the old post Shanghai lifted the dancing cover of the pot and jabbed a knife into a piece of meat. He swung the pot from the hooked wire and placed it on the ground, sitting cross-legged beside it within reach of the bubbling coffee-pot. About to fish out a piece of meat, he held the sharp-pointed knife aloft and froze into immobility, warned by some instinct that all was not well. Leaping to his feet with an unguessed agility, he turned to plunge into the wall of brush ten feet behind him when a shadow leaped out from behind the end of the cabin and sent his hand spasmodically to his Colt. He did not draw it more than halfway, for at the far end of the shadow stood a youth, crouched forward, his eyes glittering with anger and hope, in his hand a balanced six-shooter. Again instinct warned the older man: he read the hope glinting in the frosty eyes and guessed the other's cold eagerness to kill. He let the gun drop down into its holster and tried to dissemble.

"Lordy, but you gave me a start, Mister. Just in time ter eat," said Shanghai, smiling innocently as he moved back toward the fire. "Scared me nigh outer my boots, you did."

Mesquite's eyes glinted again. He slipped his own gun back into its sheath and appeared to relax. "Pull that gun, an' chuck it over here."

Shanghai felt a little shiver run up his spine and decided not to gamble. He raised his hands high above his head and slowly walked toward the youth.

"Better take it yore own self, Mister; though what ye want it fer I don't know. I'm jest an old hunter campin' fer breakfast here on the old fort, it looked so homelike, kinda. But if ye want the gun, take her," he said, in feigned good nature, and stopped to turn his back in front of his cold-eyed visitor. "I got a skinnin' knife in my belt, an' a little knife in my left-hand pants pocket," he added, gratuitously. "If yer takin' me fer an officer of the law yer makin' a funny mistake."

Mesquite swore in disgust, disarmed the old thief, and ordered him to stand against the wall of the cabin. His gaze settled on the piece of fresh cowskin against the wall, and he went to it, examined the brand, and swiftly cut two rawhide thongs from around its outer edge, where their strength was not impaired by the cicatrix of the brand. As he walked back toward Shanghai he took the badge from his pocket and pinned it on the vest.

"Shucks!" ejaculated the old man in great disgust. "Looks bad, I reckon, Mister; but I only shot an' put out o' misery an old steer that I found with a busted laig. I reckoned the hide would only get tore up by the wolves an' coyotes, an' it'll buy me a drink."

"I don't care anything about the hide," growled Mesquite, savagely. "If it was out here it was an out-

law, anyhow." He paused and considered a moment. "I come near shootin' you from up on the hill over there. What's yore name?"

"Glad ye didn't," said Shanghai, with feeling, "but what made ye want ter is somethin' I can't understand. Which one of my num'rous sins has found me out?" he asked, grinning impudently.

"What's yore name?" demanded Mesquite again.

"George Charles McHenry," answered Shanghai. "What made yer want ter shoot me?"

"George Charles McHenry spells Shanghai to me," rejoined Mesquite. "I want you for yore share in the shootin' of Hopalong Cassidy. Turn 'round, an' cross yore wrists behind you."

A minute later Shanghai, christened George Charles McHenry, a name that no one had ever heard in this part of the country, sat against the cabin, trussed tightly, and watched his captor eat generously of the stew.

"A cook hadn't oughter starve," suggested Shanghai, squirming, and hungering in the midst of odorous plenty. Then he detected a movement of the brush, so gentle and innocent as to appeal only to a man of his nature and training. "I ain't mindin' if it does burn me a little," he added.

Mesquite built up a pile of steaming meat on the cover of the pot and nodded at it.

"That's yourn, when it's cool enough. I'll feed it to you," he said, and went on eating, blowing each chunk before placing it in his mouth.

"Now that yer fed up a little an' ain't likely to get

on the prod so easy," said Shanghai, shifting a little to ease his arms, "I'll tell ye that I ain't shot at nobody fer a long time, an' never shot at Cassidy in all my born days. Who done it, an' when?"

Mesquite carried the laden pot cover over to his prisoner and stopped the talking by jamming food into the hungry mouth; but he did not make any reply to the question.

Shanghai chewed, swallowed, and tried again; but another mouthful made him chew instead. Gulping this he gave expression to a sudden fear.

"Can't ye tie me up with somethin' besides this yere green hide? It won't be long before the sun shrinks it an' turns it inter a damn vise. Ye ain't aimin' ter torture an old man that ain't never done nothin' ter ye? Ye ain't, air ye?" Genuine fear tormented him, for he had heard Slim Porter boast of experiments with the shrinking powers of fresh cowskin, and he, himself, knew enough of this action to be acutely apprehensive.

"Ain't got no rope," grunted Mesquite, blowing on another piece of meat as he sat down near the fire again. "I ain't aimin' to torture you, an' I ain't aimin' to listen to you denyin' havin' no part in that shootin'. Any talkin' you want to do can wait till we get to Twin River."

"That outfit'll lynch me if they see me, an' figger the way yer figgerin'," said Shanghai.

"Nobody'll lynch you while I can use these guns," retorted Mesquite.

"There's a little piece of rope in the other cabin,"

suggested the wary old man. "I'll be plumb grateful, Mister, if ye'll use it instid o' this yere hide. No tellin' what might happen afore we gets to town, an' this shrinks fast an' fierce when it starts."

Mesquite moved over and fed the prisoner again, nodding reassuringly.

"Eat all you want; I'll get the rope an' change yore bonds as soon as you get through."

Shanghai smiled and began eating hungrily, his keen ears tuned to catch any sound that might explain the suspicious movement he had seen in the bushes. Was it some animal, or one of the gang scouting ahead of the others? Animals of the wild did not come so close to two men and a fire in daylight; their sense of smell told them all they wanted to know, and at a much safer distance. Having eaten all he wanted he said as much, and looked toward the other cabin.

Mesquite nodded, arose, and went toward the cabin to get the ropes for the changing of the bonds. Stepping inside, he found a small coil of it hanging on a peg. Making his selection and cutting off what he needed he turned and came out again; and as he stepped through the door he went down under the combined assault of four men who leaped from both ends of the shack. Fighting like a cornered wolf gained him nothing but a blow on the head that made him senseless, and when he opened his eyes and stared around him he found that he was bound hand and foot by rawhide thongs.

## CHAPTER VII

### RAWHIDE

HE—HE—HE!" cackled Shanghai when he found the captive's eyes on him. "Ye fought a good fight, deppity; but four men on yer back was too many. Had enough of this here stew, or shall I feed ye some more of it?"

Slim Porter motioned the old man to be silent and stepped up to the prisoner, ordering him to stand erect. Mesquite slowly obeyed and exchanged stare for stare, his own so coldly ferocious that Porter involuntarily took a backward step before he remembered that the man before him was bound and harmless.

"You get busy an' tell us all you know," ordered Porter. "Talk, an' talk quick. Why wasn't we chased, an' what the hell happened? If you don't talk we'll run a few brands on yore hide!" Sudden rage at the frustration of his carefully laid plans suffused his face. "Why didn't yore friends foller us inter the hills? We left a plain trail an' gave 'em plenty of reason to foller it. Come on, talk turkey!"

"You go to hell," said Mesquite, slowly and plainly, his face flushing, and then going pale from his own rage.

Slim laughed nastily and motioned to his companions

as Shanghai stepped from the cabin holding out a piece of rope.

"Tie him up by his thumbs," ordered the leader. "If that don't make him talk, we'll try some brandin'. Tie him up while I heat the iron."

Shanghai protested, but the rope was jerked out of his hands, and three men hustled the vainly struggling prisoner into the door of the cabin. It was so low, however, that it would not serve for thumb hanging. Porter saw this at a glance, ordered one of his companions to get a lariat from where they had left their horses, and then to throw it over the roof of the shack. In a few minutes the man returned with a forty-foot rope, and Mesquite was strung up by the thumbs, his toes just clearing the ground.

Laughingly Porter regarded him, and then sat down comfortably against the other cabin.

"The sooner you talk, the sooner we let you down," he sneeringly remarked. "I've seen tougher men than you bawl like a baby after a good dose of *that.* Why didn't that outfit foller a plain trail, after the reason we gave 'em? Come on: *talk!*"

"I'll be waitin'—for you in hell, Porter," snarled Mesquite, his expression more of rage than pain.

"I ain't goin' to give you many more chances to talk," warned Porter, leaning forward and shaking a fist.

"Then you won't—learn anythin'—you—— ——," replied the prisoner, beads of sweat beginning to stand out on his forehead and face.

Porter checked his draw and sneered instead of shooting. He had nearly been tricked into granting a

merciful death. Leaning back, he drew out a pipe and a package of tobacco, and slowly prepared to smoke. Time was the thing needed here, to break the spirit of his captive; time for the agony to become unbearable. He chatted pleasantly with his companions, joking and laughing, and suggested that it might be a good idea to hang some small weight to the prisoner's belt. The replies were not hearty, and there seemed to be some restraint holding the others from thoroughly enjoying the scene. Shanghai was squirming and holding himself in check, nervous as a suspicious cat, a look of pity in his old eyes.

The minutes passed slowly, to Mesquite seeming like hours; but he hung motionless, not a tremor revealing the agony he was undergoing, which was made apparent, nevertheless, by the streams of sweat running down his face and by the bulging jaw muscles which clamped his teeth together.

Porter arose and picked up one of the prisoner's weapons, balancing it in his hand, and watching his victim closely. Mesquite's unwavering glare did not shift or betray any thought save hatred. Porter stepped slowly forward and laughed as he slipped the heavy Colt into an empty holster, thereby adding three pounds or more when an ounce might be easily sensed. Going back toward the other cabin, he picked up the second Colt and moved forward again, jamming it heavily into the other open sheath. Stepping back, he placed his hands on his hips and chuckled.

"Talkin' yet?" he asked.

The reply must have been exquisite torture to the prisoner, but he made it without a grimace. Swiftly doubling up, he raised both feet and jammed them, spurs and all, into the stomach of his grinning torturer. Porter groaned and doubled like a jack-knife, staggering to one side as he fought for breath; and then, slowly recovering wind and erectness, he sprang at the swinging man and struck twice at the undefended face. Mesquite's head rolled before the blows and they missed, and the impetus of Porter's lunge threw him off his balance and he crashed against his captive. A hoarse scream burst from him as Mesquite's teeth met in his ear, and he staggered back again, blood streaming down his neck.

"—— —— you!" he shouted, and then ran to the fire and yanked the red-hot iron from the embers. "I'll show you a trick you'll never forget! I'll burn yore sight out, an' turn you loose to die in the hills!" He stopped in amazement as a gun jabbed into the small of his back and a voice high-pitched and breaking from excitement told him to drop the iron. Whirling, he glared into the eyes of old Shanghai, whose cocked gun pressed against his stomach. "What the hell you mean?" he snarled.

"Set down," said the old man, moving his head sidewise toward the cabin. "This here's gone too damn fur!"

Growls from the others endorsed the words, and Porter, appearing slowly to acquiesce, obeyed the order.

"Cut him down," said Shanghai, and one of the men

arose with alacrity and cut the thumb ropes, first drawing the guns from their holsters and tossing them to his friends.

Mesquite staggered, fought savagely for control of himself, and sagged against the wall as he was grabbed and his hands again tied behind his back.

Porter's smooth voice broke in drawlingly.

"Well, now that you cut him down, what are you goin' to do with him?"

"We're not goin' to do nothin'," snapped Shanghai.

"Goin' to turn him loose?" sneered Porter. "Goin' to let him go, to get his friends an' track us down?" He saw the changes of expression on the faces of his three men and pushed his argument. "We can't let him go, an' we can't keep him with us. What are you goin' to do with him?"

"I don't know," muttered Shanghai; "but he ain't goin' to be strung up by the thumbs no more; an' he ain't goin' to be blinded or branded."

"Aw, hell!" said another, "shoot him an' get it over. You can't force a man like that to talk, an' I'm dead ag'in thumb-stringin' an' hot irons."

"All right," said Porter, smiling evilly. "We'll shoot him, if Shanghai is willin'," he added, sarcastically.

Shanghai shook his head in indecision, saw that he would be out-voted, and that he could offer no other suitable plan, and muttered his consent.

"Then we all votes to shoot him?" demanded Porter, and when each man's consent had been given, he smiled again. "But before we shoot him, we'll try to get some talk out of him." He paused as he heard racing hoofs

pounding down the ravine, and while he waited there burst into sight through the openings in the brush a squad of horsemen, shouting news at the tops of their voices.

There had been no raid. The raiders had been captured by Mesquite Jenkins and turned over to Sheriff Peters, who now had them all in the old log jail under heavy guard. The Double-Y outfit was riding range with rifles across their saddles and with murder in their hearts. It behove Porter and his friends to set out at top speed for Crow Valley while they had the chance to gain it.

For a few minutes an angry clamour filled the air, all eyes turned toward the prisoner. Some were in favour of shooting him forthwith; some wanted to take him along as a hostage, and shoot him later if need be; but Slim Porter, now reinforced with men who would do his bidding without question, shook his head and laughed out loud, suddenly and boisterously; and as he did so, three more men rode into sight, completing his division of the gang.

"Back track this feller, an' find his horse," Porter ordered, and watched two men slip along one of the paths in the brush. He grinned at the others and let his gaze settle on the little piece of green hide that had been around Shanghai's wrists, and he caught sight of the rest of the small piece of cow-skin which bore the brand. He picked them both up and studied them, starting a train of thought that gave him a great deal of satisfaction. His mind took him back to the Southwest, and he saw a man wrapped in the whole green

hide of a freshly killed steer and left to lie in the desert sun, held in a steadily tightening strait-jacket until thirst, or the pressure of the shrinking hide on veins, arteries, and body slowly killed its victim. He had no green hide of such a size, for he had not seen the one pegged on the rear wall of one of the cabins, but in his hand he held small pieces which had the same shrinking quality.

He looked at Shanghai.

"Where'd you get these?" he demanded.

"Up in the hills," answered the old man, nervously.

"Where's the rest of it?" continued Porter.

"Up in the hills," repeated Shanghai, trying to make his expression look truthful. Inwardly he shivered at Porter's last question: he knew what the other had in mind.

Porter seemed to consider for a moment, and then nodded, smiling grimly; he would make a virtue of necessity.

"Well, I promised you that we'd shoot him; an' I never break my word," he said, turning the pieces of hide over in his hands. "We will shoot him; but we'll shoot him my way." He faced the restless crowd and held out the hide. "I've told you boys about shrinkin' hides, an' now I'm goin' to show you somethin'." He faced the prisoner. "There ain't nothin' you can tell us about what yore friends did that we don't know, now. It might be better for you if there was. The crows an' coyotes will pick yore bones." He glanced at the two Colts lying where they had fallen and he walked to them and picked them up; and licked

his lips gloatingly when he saw the small initials cut into their stocks. "'H. C.,'" he read. "You was goin' to square up for him with his own guns, huh? Nice sentiment it was. All right: I'll borrow some of it an' kill you with one of 'em, in a way you'd never think of." He caught sight of one of the searchers riding down the side of the ravine, and nodded. "One of the best hosses on the Double-Y. It won't get loose to wander home an' start a lot of thinkin'. Tie him in the saddle quick as you can, an' we'll head for Crow Valley *pronto!*"

Mesquite was staring at Porter steadily, and had been doing so since he had regained his feet. The look in his cold eyes would have done credit to a wolverine, and his face was set with hatred. Now he laughed in his throat and said three words which often ended in a burst of powder smoke. Porter flushed, released the sudden pressure on one of the captured guns and stepped forward again, his arm swinging, and landed a fist with vicious strength against the bound man's face. Mesquite's knees sagged, but he shook his head and kept to his feet, and laughed again; and a chill crept through its hearers at the sound of it. In another moment he was roughly picked up, put in a saddle, and bound there securely; and in a few moments more the crowd rode into the brush, the prisoner roped to two of the riders.

Porter checked the cavalcade on a little sandy flat surrounded by dwarfed trees. Mesquite was taken from the saddle and after a short but savage struggle was bound to the largest of the trees, facing south, by

ropes tightly drawn around him and the tree and knotted securely. They passed around his ankles, thighs, waist, and chest, drawn tight by strong men who were taking no chances. All of the gang except the leader favoured a swift death, not wanting to ride off and leave any uncertainty behind them; but Porter was obdurate and had his way. Before he had ridden back to the old fort he had had reasons enough to make a man of his nature venomous; but his experiences with the captive, his sore stomach, and his partly severed ear had goaded him into a vindictiveness that must have outlet. Naturally cruel, he had been punished until now his chief thought was to torture.

About a dozen paces from the bound prisoner stood the sharp and split remains of a tree which had been struck by lightning. To this, one of Hopalong's Colts was tightly fastened by strips of green hide after a deal of careful sighting and adjustment. Its muzzle pointed squarely at Mesquite's heart, a target large enough to allow for slight variation. Porter emptied the cylinder of the weapon while he experimented with a separate thong, one end of which was made fast to the trigger and the other wound around the tree trunk. The longer this thong was made, the greater would be the amount of its shrinkage; and since this single-action revolver had no trigger slack when it was cocked, it needed but the slightest shrinkage to fire the weapon. Furthermore, it was practically a hair trigger, and the slightest pressure would release the hammer. Everything fixed to his satisfaction, Porter reloaded one chamber of the cylinder, turned it delicately until it

lay properly and then, resting a stick between the hammer and its slot to guard against premature fire, he fully cocked the weapon and made certain that the hammer would fall only by trigger action. He had arranged a contrivance which would inflict certain death, its threat dragged out over an indefinite period, and expected every passing moment.

"Mebby it'll fall in ten minutes, or mebby not for a couple of hours," said Porter as he arose from his kneeling position, his eyes on the unflinching ones of the bound man. "I figger that when she shortens by the thickness of a two-bit piece, that thong will do the trick. If it don't, then the wolves'll get you, or I'll finish the job myself when I come back."

"I'm bettin' that you ain't got the nerve to come back an' come alone," said Mesquite, sneering until his teeth showed. "You'll send one of yore men, you —— —— ——."

Porter laughed and ordered his men into their saddles. Mounting last, he followed his gang toward a faint trail leading past the opening; but at a burst of genuine laughter from behind, he turned in the saddle and looked back.

"Excuse me," jeered Mesquite. "I was just thinkin' of what Hopalong will do to you coyotes when he gets well!"

Porter's reply was unprintable, and he pushed into the lead as the group passed from sight around a hill.

The sounds of their horses could still be heard when Mesquite began his struggle against death, which resolved itself in a race against time, and the time was

unknown. The chest expansion and development which Hopalong had so admired now came into valuable use. He had managed to keep his lungs well inflated while he was being bound, in spite of the strength of the man who had handled that one rope. Now he exhaled, and squirmed as far sidewise as the other ropes would permit. The relaxed muscles of his thighs gave a slight slack; and he silently thanked old Shanghai for his feeble efforts with the rope which bound his throat to the tree. He bridged and writhed and struggled with a due regard to the conservation of his strength; but his anxious eyes told him that he had not gained enough. By bending to his utmost he had not gained three inches. Working and resting he at last came to the end of all gain; and still was in line with the black muzzle of the threatening Colt. While he expected to live longer than ten minutes, he believed that an hour was too much to hope for; and again he exerted all his strength, but in vain. Resting once more, his gaze on the weapon, he studied it, although it was out of his reach and beyond his power to shift; and his face slowly changed expression. At first he dared not believe what he saw; but as the moments passed he knew that he saw correctly. The thick, heavy thongs which bound the revolver to the blasted stump by barrel and handle were shrinking more rapidly than the thin thong attached to the trigger; and the extra turns of hide around the handle were slowly canting the weapon from its vertical plane. Slowly but surely the muzzle was moving a little to the right and downward; and as it tilted it eased the strain of the trigger thong.

As the significance of this sank into his brain Mesquite writhed back the other way, now fighting to lose the progress he had won; fighting to get back to the position in which he had been left by Porter, and to struggle to gain as much as he could in the other direction. Slowly he moved along the rough bark of the tree in gains so small that it took a dozen desperate efforts to win back an inch. His throat was chafed and raw, and around his waist and ankles the ropes were cutting into the flesh like iron bands. Incessantly he moved his hands up and down behind the tree, rubbing the rope against the rough bark; and by the feel of it, he knew that the knot had been tied at the back of his wrists, which brought it into contact with the bark. Another inch gained beyond the original position, and then he could gain no more. The rope around his waist was too tightly drawn.

His study of the axial direction of the revolver barrel gave him hope, for he believed that now the line of fire would nearly miss him; and then he cursed himself for being a fool. The trunk of a tree loses circumference rapidly for the first half-dozen feet above the ground; and from the feel of this tree he believed that the difference in girth was very appreciable in a foot of height. Without much effort he could raise his hands high enough to grasp the back of the waist rope, and his fingers and sore thumbs dug at it while he struggled anew. Forcing himself up by his toes against the restriction of the ropes around him, he gradually raised the waist bond, and by a series of desperate efforts he at last gained a little slack in it. He dragged

it as high as he could up the back of the tree and then hung as much of his weight on it as was possible, while he tried to lift his feet off the ground. Working one rope against the other, despite the agony of their cutting he finally managed to get up on his toes with his heels against the swelling of the bottom of the trunk, where the rough bark aided him to maintain the position. He cursed his spurs, for the long, cumbersome articles forbade planting the rear of his heels against the tree; he had to turn his feet at a wide angle and use the outer edges of the heels; and these, because of his slightly bowed legs, were inclined somewhat to rounded edges; but they were sharp enough to hold against the bark. Now that he had no use for the waist rope, he pulled at it with sore but strong fingers and succeeded in making it slip a little at a time, until the knot, which had been in front of him was at last behind the trunk where his finger nails could work at it.

He had been so occupied in his experiments with the ropes that he had given no attention to the lashed weapon, but now while he rested for a moment he studied it again. His own position had changed so much that it was difficult to detect a further deflection of the axis of the barrel; but he believed that the muzzle was now stationary. This could mean only one thing: the thongs around the barrel of the weapon, while not so thick or many as those around the grip, were now holding their own. He wondered how that could be, and then it was made plain: while these thongs were lighter and had less contracting power, they were pulling with leverage in their favour. The distance from the

cylinder, in this case the fulcrum, was twice as long in the direction of the barrel as it was toward the grip. The weapon was not moving now, but the thong attached to the hair-trigger was now in a position to obtain results by its steady contraction. That it had not got the results before was due to the fact that as the butt was twisted in the first movement, the trigger thong had been gently loosened; and now it had to shrink to make up that slack before it could trip the trigger.

The waist rope, loosened at the knot at last, fell to the ground; and Mesquite writhed swiftly sidewise from thighs to neck; and the thigh rope let him move slowly under it. The constant use of his hands and wrists had gained him nothing so far as they were concerned; but his digging heels against the rough bark and the slack he had won in the ankle rope by inching up the broad slope of the tree trunk where it left the ground had given him slack in all the bonds except that around his throat; and Shanghai had been considerate in the moderate tightness of that, even while he had tied the knot with all his strength.

Mesquite inched up on his heels, pushing sidewise as he did so. Steadily and monotonously he went through this motion until he had worked a quarter of the way around the tree; and then his foot touched a great root which ran partly above ground before being completely covered. Here was a step-up worth while, a clear eight inches! Once he stepped on that saving root he found small effort in gaining a worth-while slack in every encircling rope. Now he could move his head quite

freely, the thigh rope was working downward and at last dropped to his feet. By twisting one foot and working desperately he now drew it up and through the lowest rope. The other followed without effort, and he now was a prisoner only by the neck bond and his own arms, but either of these was sufficient to hold him to the tree until Porter came back.

He was not giving up the struggle, however; he was just beginning it, for now he had come to the end of the deadly threat of the revolver. He had more time in which to work. In desperate situations desperate gambles are often necessary: it was worth the risk of a smashed or severed wrist to try for a cutting of the rope which bound them, and he now began to move around the tree to put his cross-bound wrists in the line of fire. At last they rested where his back had been in the beginning. By twisting his body and craning his neck he could see the revolver; and then ensued a careful estimation of the axial line of the barrel. He shifted his wrists, and re-shifted them; checked and re-checked his position, and changed it a dozen times. There would be only one shot, and he must win or lose on that one. He was still moving the wrists a fraction of an inch to the left when there came a flash, a roar, and a billowing cloud of gray-white smoke. He felt a sharp stab in his right wrist; the bullet barely grazed it, but he felt the trickle of hot blood on chafed, sore, and over-sensitive skin; felt the fragments of bark spring from the impact of the bullet against the tree; but the binding rope had not been cut.

The disappointment in the futility of his hopes made

him close his eyes for a moment; and then, his jaw setting in fresh determination, he fell to rubbing the knot against the bark until his arms and shoulder muscles ached with fatigue. Forced to rest more often now, gritting his teeth against the aching numbness of his cramped muscles, he was about at the end of his strength and endurance when he felt the ropes give a little; and he renewed his efforts in a mad spurt of hope and desperation. He saw a fragment of rope's end drop to the ground and felt the knot loosen swiftly: the bullet had half severed a bend of the outer knot, and he knew that in a few minutes more he would be free.

In Crow Canyon, the very heart of Crow Valley, several men loafed before a hut built against the wall, waiting for their midday meal and arguing about the questionable wisdom of leaving Mesquite Jenkins alive, even if bound to a tree with a spring gun trained on his heart. Porter's closest friends in the gang had not backed up their leader with any real enthusiasm in his complicated torturing, and now they began to join in the arguments against it. Porter, himself, was farther down the valley, but he could be seen riding toward the hut. The loafing men watched him ride up the slope and dismount near the door, and their frowns and sullen silence let him sense that he stood alone in this thing. He, himself, had begun to have doubts about the wisdom of trusting to his murder machine; but he was too stubborn to admit it. There were other reasons for the sullenness of his companions. He had failed in his cattle-stealing plans and

had incurred for every man of his organization the undying hatred of every friend of Hopalong Cassidy; he had shown the poor judgment of taking Mesquite Jenkins's horse, a better animal than any ridden by any man in the gang, and he had taken it without drawing for it. He had also taken Jenkins's saddle when three of his friends were riding saddles that were nearly falling apart; and he had refused to part with his own saddle to any of them.

"Well, you fellers got it all figgered out how Jenkins is goin' to be rescued?" he demanded in a growl, looking from man to man.

"But there ain't no damn sense to it, a-tall!" truthfully expostulated one of his best friends, feeling that his position was unassailable. Strictly on the merits it was unassailable, but he neglected to take into consideration Porter's love for cruelty and the raging, although nearly concealed, anger over the failure of his rustling plans. Not one of his plays had succeeded, and he put the blame on Mesquite Jenkins, a man half his own age; and Mesquite, while bound and hanging from his thumbs, had kicked the breath out of his captor and then chewed partly through an ear. For a moment his anger got the upper hand, but he soon obtained control over himself. He looked at his friends and a sneer crept over his face.

"Heard a shot?" he asked.

"No; ain't shore that we could, down here," came a growled reply.

Porter looked at the speaker and then from face to face, and he shook his head in scorn.

"You all figgerin' I'm wrong in this play?"

The answers left him no room for doubt, most of them being profane and emphatic.

"All right; I've been thinkin' things over, an' I figger we ought to ride east a couple, three days." He looked at the man whose scowl was the blackest. "After we eat, Bill, you go back an' do it *yore* way."

"Why me?" demanded Bill, with great interest and a show of anger.

"For two reasons," answered Porter. "One bein' that you've shot off yore mouth too much; the other, because I'm tellin' you to. I'm lettin' you fellers have yore say in this; but don't none of you get the idear that I ain't boss of this gang, or that I won't stay boss while we hang together. Savvy me right plain?"

The circle stirred uneasily, and Bill growled; but at that moment he had no words with which to bring on an issue; and before he could put his thoughts into words, Shanghai stuck his head out of the door.

"If ye want it, come an' get it; I'll throw it away!" and the cook had to duck back to get out of the way of the rush.

When they had finished the meal and straggled from the hut they leaned against the wall, waiting for Porter to come out. Bill's face was very serious, for he had no stomach for the job assigned to him, and he was going to make one play to get out of the work.

Porter stepped through the door and stopped when he saw Bill near the wall, away from the others.

"Well?" he demanded, sharply.

"I was just thinkin'," replied Bill, tensing himself.

"What was it that Jenkins feller said about you not comin' back alone?"

Porter's face went dark and then pale, and his gun was half drawn before he checked the movement. The faces of his men showed doubt, and they were looking at him with questioning directness. On one hand was the need not to let them change an order once given by him; on the other, the need that his courage be unquestioned. For a moment he weighed the two, and found the latter to be more important. The whole fabric of his leadership rested squarely on his personality; and while his cunning was as important as courage, it was more of a passive virtue, and would be worthless if he lacked the nerve to keep this crowd of hard men under his thumb. There must be no question in any of their minds about his bravery.

"All right, Bill," he said, a wolfish smile playing across his face. "I see that I've got to prove somethin' to you; an' to make it good it's got to be proved *two* ways. After I prove it the first way, which lets you out of a job you seem a-scared to tackle, I'll come back an' prove it the second way. You better go over yore six-gun while I'm away an' see that it's workin' good. I don't want no excuses for you."

He swung into the saddle, whirled the horse around, and streaked toward and into the entrance of the narrow canyon, the sounds of the echoing hoofbeats outlasted by the silence he had left at the hut, Bill looking after him until he was lost to sight. Then the latter drew his Colt, tossed it into the air, caught it, and slipped it back into the holster.

"It's a-plenty good enough as it is right now," he said, and began to roll a cigarette.

Leaving the canyon, Porter rode up the steep slope leading from its western end, the trail turning and twisting among washes and draws and through boulder-strewn patches and scattered stands of timber. The top of the divide crossed, the trail pitched down diagonally into the next valley and then led along the slope to a narrow, rocky pass which opened on the cleared space where Mesquite Jenkins had been left. This opening was strewn with boulders, and it was necessary for the horse to pick its way and to take its own time. While the animal moved forward slowly and cautiously, its rider leaned over the pommel of his latest saddle, eager for a glimpse of the man he had come to kill. He rested his left hand on a second gun which he had slung around his waist, a mate to the one he had bound to the blasted stump.

The slightly curving ravine let Porter see the stump first, and he laughed loudly when he saw the high-thrown muzzle of the fastened weapon. It had fired! He leaned farther forward, standing up in the stirrups to gain every possible inch for vision, growling because the horse took so much time in feeling its way along. Had the gun killed, or wounded, or missed altogether? The outer tips of branches of the tree came in sight and he strained his body farther forward to see the trunk. Both his hands were occupied in helping him maintain his unnatural position, a position far out of balance. There came a sneering laugh from above him on the left-hand bank, where Mesquite Jenkins vaulted

over a sheltering bowlder to drop, feet first, on the shoulders of the rider.

Porter twisted at the warning sound, strove frantically to regain a position which would enable him to draw a gun. His hand touched the butt as Mesquite's heels struck his shoulder and neck, and the rustler was smashed out of the saddle by one hundred and fifty pounds of hurtling cowpuncher. He crashed against the jagged rocks near the base of the ravine's wall, head first, with the weight of the erect puncher still on his shoulder. There came a sharp crack and Porter's head doubled back almost against his spine. His limbs drew up convulsively and then he lay quiet.

Mesquite picked himself up and scrambled back to the rustler like a fighting cat; but as he was about to throw himself on the other he checked the movement, and nodded slowly. For a moment he crouched motionless, and then reached down toward the other's gun-belts. Arising, he slung the belts around his waist, one after the other, and made them fast as he limped toward the placidly grazing horse. Mounting and taking the time to procure Hopalong's second gun from the blasted stump, he wheeled the animal and rode into the hills, a cold smile on his colder face. He had made a mistake: he would not be waiting for Porter in hell, because Porter would be waiting for him.

# CHAPTER VIII

## TRAIL ITCH

MESQUITE dismounted before the bunkhouse door, Red Connors appearing at the sounds. "How's Hoppy?" asked the youth, concealing his anxiety under a stern mask.

"Doc says he's shore goin' to come through," answered Red, his homely face like a sunrise. The pride of friendship easily made little of the gripping fears of only a few hours before. "No bunch of bums like *them* could check Hoppy out." His grin faded and a look of accusation crept over his countenance. He and his friends had been kept close to the ranch, patrolling the lines, on the strength of the warning of the youth who now faced him and he was burning with curiosity about the results of Mesquite's trailing. "There wasn't no raid on us, Kid; we didn't get in a shot." The reason for this was no mystery to Red, but he wanted to draw the youth out.

Mesquite stepped into the building, gratefully emptied a tin dipper of water, and sighed contentedly. Like all desert-bred, he could go without water from daylight to dark and suffer no great inconvenience; but when there was plenty of water around, he liked to drink all he could hold. He knew that Red knew

why there had been no raid; but he knew that Red wanted to hear about it from him.

"I stopped the coyote that was goin' to give 'em the word," he replied. "Porter and his crew were makin' a false trail for you fellers to foller, with an ambush at the other end; but you didn't foller it. You rode range with guns across yore pommels." He smiled wistfully. "I'm near sorry I stopped 'em; you boys would 'a' shot a lot of 'em, an' felt better for doin' it."

Red grinned. "Well, it wasn't very excitin', an' there's quite some alive now that wouldn't 'a' been if you'd turned 'em loose on us. Buck went right down an' chucked 'em all in jail. What you been doin' since?"

"Nothin' much," answered Mesquite, modestly. "Busted Porter's neck an' found out where they hang out. Took one feller prisoner, but his friends jumped me, an' he got loose. Any chance to see Hoppy before I ride off?"

"Go up an' ask Buck," answered Red, successfully hiding his admiration for his young friend. "Who's in that gang, anyhow?"

Mesquite told him, and at the mention of one name Red chuckled grimly.

"Shanghai, huh?" He shook his head gently. "If they leave things to Shanghai you'll mebby have a lot of trouble findin' 'em when you go back; an' you want to ride plumb easy, too. He's a worthless bum, Kid; but when his skin's in danger he's an old coyote. There ain't nothin' smarter than that." He looked shrewdly at his young companion. "I'll betcha he's fooled you already."

Mesquite frowned, but admitted the truth.

"He's fooled me twice," he growled. "The first time was when his friends jumped me. The second was after I'd broke Porter's neck, an' back-tracked his cayuse, cautious as an Injun: took a lot of time, the way I had to keep to cover. I found the canyon where they'd had grub, an' I follered their tracks for near a mile. Lost 'em in a crick. How'd they know I'd got Porter, an' know it so soon?" He scratched his head in perplexity. "Well, I lost 'em: that's all. I rode back here to learn a little more about the country hereabouts, an' farther east." He grinned modestly. "I still got ten to shoot."

Red raised his eyebrows in pretended dismay.

"You mean you still got ten to capture, Kid," he rebuked. "Yo're a deppity sheriff now. You got to remember that when yore gun-hand gets the itch."

Mesquite's eyes grew suddenly frosty, but he admitted the truth of his companion's words.

"Yes; I got ten to capture," he said, frowning a little; and then the frown lifted. "But I'm hopin' they put up a fight." He shook his belts gently. "I got to know more about the country first," he suggested.

Red was engaged in an argument with himself. He knew this country as he knew the ranch; and he flattered himself that Shanghai was no great puzzle to him, wherein he was wrong. He had been doing a lot of intense thinking during the last few hours, and he had determined to join Mesquite in the chase; but, face to face with the capable youth, he was too proud to offer his services, feeling that they would not be accepted.

"Big Moose is one of their hangouts, Kid, when Twin River gets too uncomfortable," he said, looking through the door to avoid his companion's steady gaze.

"Over east they got friends in Broken Wheel; but there's a lot of wild an' broken country in between, an' I'm figgerin' they're scattered. Better stay here awhile an' give 'em a chance to light, an' get careless. If you give 'em time they'll come together again." To himself he was asking what horse he would take, and how he could get away without Mesquite or Buck seeing him leave. Buck was like a fussy mother sage-hen these days. Carelessly he asked an important question, for there were any number of canyons up in the country Mesquite had just left. "Where was it you lost 'em, Kid?"

Mesquite told him, sketching the valley and canyon in the terse and vivid terms of a plainsman, a description hopelessly inadequate to any one but a kindred spirit. He did not describe likenesses, but differences; and Red knew at once the name of the canyon.

"That's Crow Canyon," grunted Red, his drooping lids hiding most of his eyes; but there was a certain eagerness about him, a certain tell-tale poise of body that was not so easily masked. At that moment he saw a man emerge from the door of the ranchhouse kitchen and start toward the well, a bucket in hand. "There's Buck, now. Go up an' see him. He'll tell you if you can see Hoppy. Doc left this mornin' to make a call. You shore rounded 'em up slick an' clean in Twin River, Kid." He tried to make his words casual and to hide his proud elation at how this mere boy had tied

up thirteen hard characters. "We found Sandy herdin' 'em with an eight-gauge, an' swearin' in Scotch Choctaw because they wouldn't gamble with it. We buried Trotter for you. Funny thing: he was killed in the saloon; but somebody dragged him out before it burned." He watched his companion closely. "You did a good job when you set fire to the Why-Not."

"What you mean, set fire to the Why-Not?" asked Mesquite, his face devoid of intelligent expression. It appeared that he was surprised, shocked, and incredulous.

Red studied him for a moment, and then scratched his head, trying to master a persistent grin.

"Slip of the tongue, Kid. But it shore was a funny thing: it got afire a couple minutes after you left Sandy's."

"That's what I call a remarkable co-*in*cidence," replied Mesquite, blandly.

Red nodded. "You can bet on that: it ain't nothin' else."

"Wonder how it got afire?" mused the youth, furrows of concentration on his brow.

"Them new spark arresters on the *en*jines ain't much good," suggested Red; "but who would 'a' thought a spark would 'a' lit plumb on Ike's saloon?" It was fifteen miles as the crow flies to the nearest point on the railroad. The grin won, and broke out all over Red's freckled face. "Slick Milligan said it shore burned like a haystack at the end of a long dry spell; an' he reckoned he smelled kerosene but," he deprecated, "everybody knows Slick's got a powerful imagination."

"Still, you never can tell about them sparks," observed Mesquite, thoughtfully. "They set fire to an awful lot of grass." He yawned sleepily, stretched, and turned carelessly toward the door. "Reckon I'll go up an' see Buck. Seein' that he figgers on stayin' here on the ranch, he'll mebby have more to say about the country hereabouts than you have."

Red lolled to the door and lounged against it, idly watching the youth mount and ride that few hundred paces. He saw Buck put down the water pail and stand erect to welcome the rider; and then Red's actions shook loose from indolence like the snap of a spring, and became high-speed. The wrangler horse was picketed behind the house where there was a small patch of grass, hitherto overlooked; and as luck had it, the animal was a good one. The ranchhouse door had scarcely closed behind Mesquite and the foreman before Red was racing from the bunkhouse kitchen, his arms full of canned goods and his pockets full of cartridges and tobacco. Knowing the country that he was heading for, he hurried back and put on a pair of old, worn leather chaps.

In the ranchhouse Hoppy smiled at sight of his visitor, but obeyed Buck's over-anxious injunctions to remain silent. He listened appreciatively to Mesquite's account, and his eyes twinkled. When the youth mentioned Shanghai, the wounded man chuckled; Shanghai was a nuisance and a reprobate; but Hopalong did not disguise his frank admiration for the old man's cunning. At the mention of this name Buck swore. At last the tale was told, and the teller of it leaned back

against the wall, waiting for Buck's frank comment to cease.

"I don't know much about the country up this way," said Mesquite during a lull. "An' I never knowed that Red was so damn dumb."

"Huh?" grunted Buck in surprise; but in Hoppy's eyes there leaped a light of unholy joy, and a smile swept over his face. He had amused himself during periods of wakefulness by picturing Red's intense disgust at having to stay on the ranch when a war-trail called so insistently. But the smile became tempered. Good as he was in a fight, Red was no match for Shanghai in a game of wits, and the worst of it was that Red would not admit it. In such wild and broken country wits would win. He concentrated to review the country from Red's standpoint, and gradually faint lines appeared on his visual map. Certainty made them become heavier. His knowledge of Red Connors had the warrant given by almost a lifetime of companionship, and he closed his eyes to figure out Red's course of action. Blindfold chess is not so miraculous when a born player takes it up; and no chess player ever knew the value of the pieces of his chosen game any better than Hopalong Cassidy knew Red Connors and the lay of the board.

Buck was laboriously describing the country, and when he mentioned a certain locality by name he paused at the emphatic grunt from the bed. Mesquite leaned forward eagerly, forcing a chuckle of admiration from the wounded man, who admired sharp wits.

"Tell me all you know about this here Broken Wheel

country," demanded Mesquite, turning swiftly to Buck; and while he listened his eyes not for an instant left those of the contented man on the bed.

Buck finished. "Reckon that's all," he said, hesitatingly.

"Shore you ain't forgot nothin', left nothin' out?" asked Mesquite, quickly, his eyes on Hopalong's; and what he read in them made him relax and rest assured. He unconsciously patted the two Colts at his thighs, Hopalong's Colts; and again the eyes of the wounded man flamed with pride and grimness. Ambushing certainly was going out of style in Twin River County.

"If you'll tell the bunkhouse cook to give me some supplies," said Mesquite, reluctantly turning from the bed, "I'll be on my way agin."

"I've told him a'ready to give you anythin' you wanted, any time you showed up," said Buck. He paused awkwardly. "That shore was a fine hand you played down in Twin River the other night, Mesquite; but you shouldn't oughta have set fire to the Why-Not."

"Red said mebby a spark from the enjines on the railroad done that; but I can't see as any real damage was done. It was only a snake nest."

Buck ironed out his smile. "Well, of course," he said, slowly, "accidents is accidents; an' we all know that the damn railroad sets a lot of grass an' brush fires. I once saw twenty miles of sage on fire from one little enjine spark. Took three outfits three days to lick it. An', of course, the wind was purty high that night."

Mesquite's facial muscles twitched a little in spite

of him, for the wind on that night, what there was of it, had come from the wrong direction and left the railroad blameless. He found himself warming to this quiet, unhesitant loyalty, which anticipated trouble and smoothed the way. Never in his life before had he been blessed with the close companionship of such a crowd of men; but always, until he had met Hopalong Cassidy, he had had to keep wary eyes on his closest acquaintances. There was a quality about the mere presence of these men that soothed like the snow line of desert mountains. With such a crowd at his back he would be willing to storm the gates of hell; and the thought made his throat become thick with surging pride and affection. Strange things were happening to him on this northern range. He swung to the door, his heels clipping sharply on the board floor, his spurs jangling; and as he reached the opening he turned abruptly, waved at the smiling man on the bed, and spoke with a concealing crispness.

"See you later, Hoppy; you, too, Buck."

"Don't you—shoot Red—Kid," warned Hopalong, his eyes dancing like sunlight on a crystal.

Mesquite stopped as though he had been shot, and leaned forward tensely, staring into the speaking eyes of the man on the bed. For several moments he stood thus, reading, probing, his thoughts racing over every trail. Hopalong was strong enough to tell what he meant by the words; but the value of the ranch would not have bribed him to utter another word. He tingled with pleasure at the changing expressions on the face of his protégé, and he closed his eyes under the pleasant

anodyne of contentment when Mesquite's growled reply struck his ears.

"Glad you told me, Hoppy. *Damn* that red-head!"

At the sound from the door he glanced around, just in time to see Buck's coat-tails whipping from sight. Buck's trail, easily guessed, was also easily followed, not only because of the clipping heels, but also because of the language streaming in the foreman's wake. The kitchen door slammed with a jar, and when Mesquite opened it he saw Buck striding purposefully, or as much so as the riding boots would allow, toward the bunk-house. By the time Mesquite reached that building, the foreman popped into sight again to glare out over the rolling range.

Lanky Smith was riding toward the house, talking to himself with fervid emphasis; and when he swung down before the door he frankly scowled at the foreman and flicked a glance at Mesquite. Short as the glance was, Mesquite recognized entreaty in it; but he stood pat until he knew more about the cards.

"You seen Red?" demanded Buck, looking Lanky straight in the eyes.

Lanky wiped the tobacco juice out of a corner of his mouth and became calm and canny. Just because he had a bone to pick with Red was no reason to share it.

"Seen too damn much of him, all m'life," he grunted. "What'd he do to *you?*"

"He's taken his rifle, raided the kitchen, an' cleared out!" snapped Buck. "*That's* what he's done!"

Lanky reviewed the list of crimes judiciously, found them to be peculiarly heinous, and wiped the other

corner of his mouth. He squinted at his beloved foreman in heavy surprise.

"You don't say! Well," he cogitated aloud, "that ain't nothin', seein' it was Red." Mentally he was cursing his friend Connors, for now his suspicions were confirmed. What business did Red have to go off on a war-trail that had been denied to them all? And, worse than that, how had Red learned that he, Lanky Smith, had just made up his mind to do that very same thing? Sweet chance he'd have to get away now, with Buck aroused and full of suspicion. From now on the foreman could be counted on to spend most of his time around the bunkhouse.

"The cross-eyed Siwash!" said Lanky, for good measure, and also to mark a little time. He wanted a chance to do some real thinking.

"How come yo're ridin' in so cussed early?" demanded Buck, whose suspicions, once aroused, became all-enfolding.

Lanky knew the signs and kept his poker face on duty.

"Got thirsty," he grunted, and pushed past the foreman to get a drink of water that he did not want, conscious that Buck had turned his head and was watching him. He forced himself to drink deeply, sighed with hypocritical relief, and rattled the dipper against the side of the keg.

"How'd you like to go after Red, an' bring him back?" asked the foreman, watching closely.

"Ain't I got nothin' more to do than go off in this hot weather, herdin' tumblebugs?" indignantly demanded Lanky. "Let the coyote go; he'll come back

when his grub runs out." He grinned, and wandered to the door again. "It's terrible hot, ridin' 'round in the sun," he growled. "I'm huntin' for shade, *I* am."

Buck's frown faded slowly, and he rubbed his chin. He was sorry that he had wronged Lanky by his unjust suspicions, but he found relief in the thought that Lanky did not know it. He sighed, looked over the range again, and went slowly back toward the ranchhouse. Anyhow, he did not have to worry much about Red's absence; Mesquite had collected most of the cattle thieves left around Twin River.

Lanky leaned against the door and hummed under his breath, and then became aware that the youthful puncher near by was quietly studying him. He spat with great care, and looked carelessly at Mesquite.

"Tough life, ain't it, Kid?"

Mesquite looked thoughtfully at the well near the last house, which Lanky had passed without even a sidewise glance as he rode in to the bunkhouse to quench his thirst with warm and stale water.

"An' which way was *you* figgerin' to go?" he asked, his gaze returning to settle on the innocent face of the old Bar-20 roping expert.

"*Me?* Which way was *I* goin'?" asked Lanky, frankly curious.

Mesquite smiled. Somehow the more he came in contact with this gang of bow-legged, dissembling cow-abusers, the more he had to smile from sheer gladness. There wasn't a man in the whole crowd that wouldn't look a killer in the eye and tell him to go to hell; yet, strangely enough, they seemed to shed a warming sun-

light around them. He walked slowly toward the door to go into the kitchen for the supplies Buck had told him he could have, but as he walked he answered:

"To catch Shanghai an' the rest."

Lanky was hurt and offended by this cruel and unjust accusation.

"To catch Shanghai an' the rest," he repeated, making room for the youth to pass. "By Gawd, Kid! You shore gave me an idear! That's just what I oughta done." He looked again at the ranchhouse, where the door at that moment slammed for the second time, and he made a grimace. It froze on his face as Skinny Thompson slipped around the far corner of the bunkhouse, crouched and cautious; and then froze in his tracks as he found Lanky's accusing eyes on him. Skinny began to paw around in the dust as Lanky leaned forward.

"What the hell *you* doin'? Payin' a bet?" demanded the rope expert.

Skinny straightened up slowly and grinned.

"Naw; I'm lookin' for m'knife. Ain't seen it, or *borrowed* it, have you?"

"Yeah," grunted Lanky, fighting a smile. "Red found it, an' went off huntin' for you."

"Huh?" ejaculated Skinny, and became lost in deep thought. How could Red, good as he was, find something that had not been lost? His friend's gaze did not waver, and Skinny felt uncomfortable. "Did you see Red, *too?*" The answer made him grin: misery loves company. "Did he wig-wag to you what he wig-wagged to me?"

"He did," confessed Lanky. "An' Buck's watchin' us an' the horse corral through the winder, up yonder. *Don't* look around, you damn fool!"

"I ain't, you jackass; I'm lookin' for m'knife," retorted Skinny, pawing again.

Mesquite, his arms full of supplies, pushed past Lanky and strode to his horse, believing that it would be wise to stay near the animal. He dropped the gunny sacks, rode around the house in the direction of the horse corral, and returned a few minutes later with the best of the cavy under his saddle. Swinging down from the animal, he began to tie the supplies in place, the two punchers watching him silently and enviously. Mounting again, he picked up the reins and glanced at the two loungers.

"Just because they didn't raid the ranch ain't sayin' they won't," he told them. "I didn't get all the bums; an' I reckon me an' Red can take care of things out yonder," and he whirled the animal and made a line of dust across the range.

"Wonder what he's talkin' about?" pondered Skinny.

"Aw, hell," said Lanky, after a moment. He savagely pulled his sombrero down over his eyes to hide a gleam in them, and went out to his horse.

"Aw, hell," quoted Skinny, and turned to go back around the house to look over the remaining animals in the corral, thoughtlessly using his knife to pare off a generous chunk of tobacco. At Lanky's quick glance at the article which was supposed to be lost, Skinny grinned, and went placidly on his way.

Up at the ranchhouse Buck moved slowly from the

window, a grin creeping over his face in place of the frown. He smiled too soon, however, because when the sun rose the next morning Lanky Smith was missing; and he reached the bunkhouse just in time to catch Skinny furtively loading a horse with enough food to last him for weeks. Skinny mumbled something about a line house being bare of supplies, dumped the gunny sacks on the ground in high dudgeon, and stamped back into the house. That night he rode into Twin River, whipped three bums, and got drunk to drown his grief.

# CHAPTER IX

## UNWELCOMED FRIENDS

BROKEN WHEEL was not the town it once had been, as any old-timer would tell you, with details, if you looked good for a drink. Located at a gap in the hills, where the bunchgrass plain curved gently down from the bases of wild and rugged hills, it stood in the pass between the great expanses of rolling plains to the north and a greater expanse of rolling range to the south. To the north the plain struggled to the Missouri, past it and into Canada; to the south it was contracted by range after range of hills and mountains through a one-time hunter's paradise, with valley after valley leading deviously toward the seemingly limitless prairies. Sioux, Cheyenne, and Crow had hunted here and fought one another, and the first two had made common cause against the treaty-breaking whites. In the days of the great buffalo migrations the brown, shaggy herds had poured through this pass, grazing steadily southward, flanked by pickets of ostracized old bulls, and fenced by great packs of alert gray wolves running on the side hills and making desperate forays when hunger drove. Over the fords of the Missouri and the Yellowstone, forced steadily into a more compact mass because of the configuration of the country,

the herds became vast by the time they reached this wide and easy door to the empire of grass to the south, turning the vista into a moving brown carpet and filling the air with sound.

Here the hide hunters had flocked to foul the air with powder smoke and stain the earth with crimson. Here the hide buyers had come to trade and dicker, cannily running to the source of supply with oval whisky kegs instead of waiting, like many others, for the hides to come to them. A good hide hunter could make a hundred dollars a day plying his trade, and the best buffalo hunters in the West had made this town their headquarters, some of them employing from two to six men whose sole duty it was to follow on behind and skin the animals their employers had shot down. Money flowed like water and the town was mad. Wagons corralled had worn through the soil of the plain; tents and even wickiups had dotted the green and gray tints of the plain against the sombre undertones of brown, while against the horizon on two sides rose spires and ramparts of ragged rock and the eroded and sand-blasted faces of great buttes, which to the imaginative mind presented architectural forms readily classified. Time moved swiftly over this period of slaughter, condensing it into a few years. The skin hunters and the buyers had long since departed, southward bound toward the Arkansas to finish their greedy slaughter; but this rallying place in the hills, this well-known rendezvous clung tenaciously to its hold on the side hill, weathering empty years by the momentum of the full, and appearing to have been gifted with the

power of hibernation. Still on the junction of two established trails, the few shacks had eked out a scanty livelihood until the herds of long-horned cattle began to creep up from the valley of the North Platte, and another hoofed migration took the form of fact.

Be it understood that the fathers of all trails were the trails of the buffalo and, perhaps, the elk. Hundreds of divides in that northern country showed their deep and well-beaten paths. Fords were readily located by the convergence of these paths, and water remained no secret while such a path could be found. The Indian found his game trails made for him, the best way over the mountains marked out for him; and his generic name, given to many such, is an honour not deserved. There lay the paths for the trapper and the wanderer of the wilds, there lay future wagon roads, worn so deep that they would long endure, and many of them deepened by the rains into dry washes which long since had lost all signs of the original road. Always they lay across the firmer soils, always they followed the more reasonable grades, reaching from one watering place to another, and, where the lay of the land permitted, were as straight as the flight of a bullet.

Where the buffalo had found a way and good grazing on both sides of it, the long-horned herds could follow; and Broken Wheel found the coming of the Texas herds to be like the warm spring winds that end the sleep of all hibernators. Broken Wheel awoke, stretched, and bestirred itself; and before long the number of its shacks and shanties had grown, and its population doubled. The northbound drives held high for a num-

ber of years, and then slowly shrank; but they had placed cattle on the bunchgrass ranges, to thrive and multiply; they had brought a population to be fed and wined and gamed with; and now the herds once more moved through Broken Wheel Gap, this time southbound toward the beef trails and the railroad. Broken Wheel, having held on tightly and lived through a dormant period, was once again a fixture and counted of importance throughout the region roundabout.

Broken Wheel was tough, although it would have denied it in powder smoke if such a measure were necessary; its dusty street, angling along the hillside, was lined with buildings that had never known the touch of pride or paint; corrals, stables for winter days, and an opulent feedstore, bespoke the end of many careless trails. A bridge spanned a drywash, dry most of the year; but at times the bridge was greatly needed, and two of them had been swept away. Ravines and gullies gashed the hillside, boulder-strewn sun-parlours for occasional basking rattlesnakes; the parched ground with its sun-cured grasses lay brown and gray and dead under the frowns of wild and broken ridges, rimrock escarpments, and grotesque cliffs of painted, eroded architecture in soft stones, shales, and clays.

In so wild and desolate a region, set in the heart of a great cattle range, where Nature seemed to have dumped her cart of leftovers, careless alike of buttes and mountains, valleys and ravines, or in what order they fell, it would not be strange to find a stern and suspicious breed of men clinging to the safety of this maze of fastnesses. Fugitive trails led in; raiding

trails led out. Once gained, here was a haven of safety, and one which had turned back more than one grim posse. Its reputation was not savoury, a reputation begun by Sioux and Cheyenne, carried on by masked horsemen in the days of the stagecoach and placer gold, and to be perpetuated by the limitations of the cattle industry and the general weaknesses of frontier banks. Since the arrival of the first gold rush and its attendant excitements, life had moved swiftly in this tangled mass of chasms, with death following swiftly and sniffing at many an unsuspecting heel.

Through the mazes rode Mesquite Jenkins, following a well-marked trail, with certain well-described landmarks plain to his sight. His loosely buttoned vest was innocent of that badge of office pinned thereon by the Sheriff of Twin River County, for Mesquite had a sense of the fitness of things, and felt that, like as not, a deputy sheriff would be held to be a common enemy. Sunlight glinting from the nickeled surface might evoke an echoing shot. The bottoms of the deeper chasms and the more densely wooded ravines were fading into a blanketing indistinctness, and the western side of the higher buttes flamed with a deeply reddish gold, the shadows down their lower sides deep and sombre. This was the evening of the fifth day of hard and steady riding, and its individual shadows were running together into one all-covering whole when he drew rein where the trail started down a wide and saucer-shaped valley. Already the centre of the valley was taking on purple tints, and lavender dyed its higher edges. Through the purple dark there sprang

up, here and there, pale lights nestling in a compact group, blazoning the triumph of kerosene. The air grew shrewdly chill, and he buttoned the dusty vest, pulled the pendent neckerchief around to hang in front, and drew on the dusty coat.

Broken Wheel looked much better at night than it did in the day, in this way resembling some of its gentler sex, and after dark it grew in population in a way to remind one of the oft-mentioned mushroom. The town was not as noisy as one might expect, although at one end of the street a dance hall did its modest best to make up for the lack of noise around it. Those whose consciences were reasonably clear, or who for the time being could frisk and gambol about in reassuring prominence, would be found foregathered near the discordant piano, thus proving that virtue rewards itself. One's standing in the eyes of the law might be approximated, by one who knew the gradations, by their proximity to that dance hall. Raiding the hills was one thing; raiding the town, another; and the trails to town had shown the way to many a posse.

Mesquite rode lazily along the street, drawn by the light and cacophony of the hamlet's centre of attraction; but in so strong a light the brand of his horse might prove too informative. He dismounted before a building which boasted of a stable in the rear, led his horse around it, and soon pushed open the door.

Half-a-dozen men looked up quickly at his entry, their faces partly hidden because the lights of the lamps were behind them, a precaution instinctive to their breed. For a moment there was close-lidded scrutiny, and then

half-a-dozen hands moved gently, and the habitués resumed their interrupted occupations, not knowing how fortunate they were in their unanimous decision for peace.

A glass clattered on the greasy bar, suggestively or intimidatingly, according to the nature of the newcomer, and the gesture accompanying its movement left nothing to the imagination.

Mesquite walked slowly forward in the direction of the menacing if evanescent gesture, leaned his left side against the counter, and looked calmly into the bartender's questioning eyes. His coin stopped against the glass with a clear, musical *clink*, and for a moment was the only sound. Then he smiled in this atmosphere of latent hostility.

"Drink that rotten liquor yoreself; I'm keepin' sober on a bet," he said, evenly. "I want a feed for my cayuse, a feed for myself, an' clean beds for both of us. If anybody comes pesterin' around, askin' if a stranger rode in to-night, what'll you tell 'em?"

The bartender, licking his lips furtively as a reaction from the stare of those cold eyes, flicked the coin back toward the giver, and forced a grin.

"The only stranger I saw to-night was a tall, towheaded gent with whiskers," he remarked. "Oats fer yer hoss, an' clean straw; steak, onions, an' p'taters fer yerself; an' we'll see what we can do about the clean bed. Three dollars now."

To find miracles of digestion one should look for them in an out-of-doors man, and preferably a young man. The grease-soaked steak, the greasy onions and potatoes rested lightly on Mesquite; the long miles in

the saddle, in the crisp air and blazing sunshine, tended to make him tired and sleepy, and his hearty supper conspired with the close atmosphere of the room to make him nod in his chair. Arousing himself with an effort, he arose and went outside, visited the stable to see that his horse had been properly taken care of, and on his way back to the saloon and hotel his attention was engaged by the noise and glare of the dance hall. Inside that building he might find one of the men he was after, and the thought sent him walking cautiously toward one of the grimy side windows. Stopping a few feet from the glass for a preliminary survey of the room, he found that he could see only one part of it, and that one none too well because of the grime on the glass. Moving closer, he at last pressed his face against a dingy pane, and stiffened with a great surprise.

At one side of the circle of radiance cast by an overhead lamp, with his feet on a table, Red Connors leaned back at ease; but Mesquite saw that the red-head was alert and observant, and that he occupied a little cleared space, while other parts of the room were crowded enough. While Mesquite looked he saw a movement in a knot of men and women directly behind Red. A man was silently squirming through to the front, and as he raised an enweaponed hand in the direction of Red, Mesquite clearly saw his face: it was Mexicali, far from his 'dobe house on the heat-, dry-, and dust-cursed sage plain south of Santa Fé, one of Porter's gang, and one of the would-be assassins of Hopalong Cassidy. Writhing sidewise, Mesquite drew a Colt and fired through the glass; but simultaneously Red Connors's

feet struck the floor and the Colt he had been nestling in his hand flared toward Mesquite. Mesquite's bullet barely missed Red's neck, but Red's had cut a furrow in Mesquite's shoulder.

Flaming with rage at this obvious treachery, Mesquite leaped through the window, taking the sash and remaining glass with him, two guns in his hands serving as hammers against the criss-crossed sash. Three great bounds brought him to Red's side, and the two angry men glared at each other, arousing pious and palpitating hopes in the breasts of the open-mouthed crowd.

"What the hell you mean by that?" asked Mesquite, his eyes icy cold.

Red's reply was a snarled retort.

"Saved yore mangy life, you damn fool! What'd *you* mean, shootin' at me like that?"

A soft movement in the room sent Mesquite whirling about to face it, his two guns threatening the crowd; but while he watched them he snapped a reply to Red out of the corner of his mouth.

"Look behind you, an' *see*, you red-headed fool!" To the crowd he said nothing, words being unnecessary. Of all the signs in the sign language, a pair of cocked Colts are the most understandable; and the cold promise on the face behind them was very plain.

Red whirled, looked with a vast surprise at the figure huddled half under a table, noticed the Mexican trousers and other Mexican trappings. Glancing at Mesquite, and from him to the shattered window, and back again to the quiet figure on the floor, Red growled deep in his throat and turned the figure over.

"Mexicali!" he grunted, and his suspicion died. He turned to look at Mesquite, slowly stepped to his side, and spoke, his own gun swinging up to cover the scowling crowd.

"I'll handle these leavin's, Kid; an' I'm plumb ashamed of myself, actin' like I did. Suppose you go out an' take a look near the window. If I didn't miss my shot, you'll find Bill Hoskins layin' about three feet from where you stood. I caught sight of his face an' the glint of his weapon over yore shoulder."

For a moment Mesquite gave no sign that he understood or even heard his companion's words; but slowly the expression of his face softened a little, and he moved sidewise toward the window, his guns still on the muttering crowd as though fearful of missing an excuse to shoot.

Red stood motionless, staring down the men before him; and his face broke into a wrinkled grin, both relieved and apologetic, as his friend's words reached him through the window.

"You hit him, Red, judgin' from the signs; but he got away. You comin' out, or am I goin' back in?"

"Don't see nobody else that I know in here," answered Red; "so I reckon I'm comin' out, unless yo're honin' to come in."

"I don't like the smell, 'though the powder smoke has helped it," replied Mesquite, leaning forward against the sill, his body bending until it was partly within the room. "Come when yo're ready, an' take all the time you wants: I'm only lookin' for an excuse to burn more powder." His two guns moved sugges-

tively as his red-haired friend walked carelessly toward the bar, poured himself a drink from a handy bottle, flung a coin on the counter, and then calmly sauntered toward the door and through it.

"All right, Kid," said Red, cheerily. "I can plug four straight from where I'm standin'."

Mesquite drew his head and body from the room, straightened up, and moved slowly back into the darkness, the open window framing an uneasy group.

"You mean you could plug 'em if you didn't miss 'em," he retorted, with true Bar-20 spirit; "like you did Hoskins."

Red joined him, properly indignant, explaining the whys and wherefores of that regretted miss. They wandered back toward Mesquite's quarters, neither of them thinking of going on the defensive by getting out of town. At the door they paused to finish the argument before entering the building.

"Anyhow, hittin' the glass at that angle," said Red, continuing his explanatory remarks, "would throw it off; an' I only saw half of his face. It's a wonder I didn't miss him entire, shootin' that-a-way."

"It wouldn't 'a' throwed Hoppy off," retorted Mesquite. "How'd you get here so quick, anyhow?"

"Took a straighter trail," answered Red, grinning.

"You aimin' to sleep with me?" demanded Mesquite, somewhat aggressively.

"Not if I can help it," retorted Red with fervour.

Mesquite pushed open the door and entered the saloon, Red close behind him. The leader went over to the bar and spoke to the man behind it, jerking a

thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the cheerful Red.

"Got a bed for that wart?" he demanded.

The bartender grinned affirmatively, and wiped off the counter, glancing knowingly at the red-head.

"He spoke for one before you come in," he said. "Either of you fellers mind doublin' up with another stranger that jest rode in? The beds are all gone, an' he has to sleep some'ers."

"I shore do mind it," growled Mesquite. "I ain't sleepin' with no man. Let him sleep in the stable."

"My sentiments exact," endorsed Red, frowning.

At that moment the rear door opened and the stranger entered quietly from his visit to the stable to see how his horse was being taken care of. Mesquite's words were plain and spoken without any attempt to keep others from hearing them.

"Then I'll have to sleep with Red, seein' you spoke first," sighed the newcomer, grinning.

Mesquite wheeled like a flash, and Red had taken a short step forward; and they both said exactly the same thing at exactly the same instant.

"Lanky,—— damn it!"

"Knowed you was here when I heard the shootin'," said Lanky. "I'll match the pair of you to decide the sleepin' question," he offered, producing a coin, in no way abashed by the lack of warmth and cordiality of his welcome.

"What you doin' here?" growled Mesquite, still staring.

"An' how did you get here so quick?" asked Red, who

was never very much surprised by anything that his ranch-mate might do.

"I'm here to ride herd on you two, an' keep my eye skinned lookin' out fer Red," said Lanky in answer to question number one; "an' I got here so quick because Red ain't the only man as knows short-cuts inter this Broken Wheel country. My trail had better grass fer my cayuse, an' I didn't have ter lose no time while he grazed. Come on: odd man sleeps alone," and he caught the descending coin and slapped a hand over it.

Grudgingly Mesquite flipped and covered, and after a moment of disgusted silence, Red followed suit. The three coins uncovered, Red and Mesquite discovered that they both showed heads. Lanky proudly displayed tails, and he had a bed to himself although he had come last.

"An' the last shall be first," muttered the bartender, piously.

"What's that?" demanded Mesquite, whirling with his hand on a gun.

"I was sayin' I don't reckon it's goin' to rain," hurriedly replied the dispenser of drinks.

The language of the two losers was jumbled, but in no way disturbed by what it expressed, Lanky picked up his saddle and threw it on his shoulder, grasped his rifle, and stepped aside to let the bartender show him the way. Smilingly he followed, toward the unshared bed he so well merited.

Red looked at Mesquite, and Mesquite looked at Red, and without a word they picked up their belongings and slowly, thoughtfully, climbed the stairs.

# CHAPTER X

## INFORMATION WANTED

MESQUITE rearranged the blanket and turned over again, vaguely wondering how many times he had turned over during that long and unpleasant night; and every time he had shifted his position, Red Connors had growled sleepily and then settled back to resume his snoring; and every time he began to snore Mesquite had forcibly rolled him over on his side, and then tried desperately to get to sleep before the melodious red-head sagged back again. After what had seemed to be an eternity, Mesquite saw the eastern sky pale and grow brighter, muttered profane thankfulness, crawled over his companion, and sat on the edge of the bed, his head sagging and his lids heavy.

Red's sleeping countenance was not placid. A frown puckered his unlovely face and set wrinkles on his forehead; and when a man wears a frown in his sleep it is not a reassuring indicator of a sweet waking disposition. Now as he pushed Mesquite's elbow off his stomach, he opened his eyes and scowled.

"What the hell you reckon yo're doin', anyhow?" was his pleasant good-morning.

"Aw, shut up!" growled Mesquite, as one of Lanky's crescendos vibrated the thin partition.

Red blinked at him and arose on one elbow.

"Hey, Kid," he said, candidly; "I'd just as lief sleep with a litter of half-growed pups as with you. What was the matter with you? Dreamin' you was herdin' cattle, or bustin' cayuses, or somethin'?"

Mesquite's retort was of such a nature that the simultaneous blush of red in the eastern sky might have been explained by other than the generally accepted reasons for this phenomenon. Then he became specific.

"You sounded like you'd swallered a whole brass band. You got the itch, or somethin'?"

"If I has I shore know where it come from," retorted Red, and then he listened as another crescendo climbed the scale, quavered on a high note, broke into a whistle, and slid gracefully down again to end in a gurgle.

"—— ——!" said Red, indignantly.

"—— ——!" echoed Mesquite, savagely. "I been listenin' 'most all night to that coyote, when I wasn't listenin' to you, an' I ain't goin' to listen no more." He groped for a boot, his eyes half shut with sleep. "Between the *two* of you——" his voice trailed into silence, an admission of the futility of trying to express his feelings by words. He arose, staggering a little, and started for the door, the boot firmly gripped in his hand.

"What you aimin' to do, Kid?" asked Red in sudden hopeful interest.

"Goin' to stop that yowlin'," grated the Kid, his face for the first time showing an expression of pleasure. A wolf scenting a kill wears much the same look. He was so enthralled by the thought of his expedition of

assault and battery that he failed to realize that the yowling had ceased.

"Wait!" said Red with explosive eagerness. "I'm joinin' this here massacre!" He bounced from the bed and reached for one of his own boots, and in that position he froze, for at that moment there came a thundering knock on the thin partition. It sounded like a thrown boot, with plenty of muscle behind it, and delicate clouds of dislodged dust and sand sprang from the woodwork. A roar followed it.

"Shut up!" bellowed Lanky's voice, a voice out of all proportion to his weight. "Don't you reckon nobody wants to sleep, a-tall? What's the matter with you coyotes, anyhow?"

Mesquite looked at Red, and Red looked at Mesquite, and both sighed helplessly in the face of such gall, dropped their leather weapons and sagged, side by side, on the edge of the bed; and when they spoke it was in unison, the words identical.

The door opened and Lanky entered. Nodding surlily to his friends he approached the washstand, where there was one towel and a pitcher part full of water. He scrubbed diligently, using the last drop of the water to rinse his face, wiped thoroughly on the towel, and chucked it on the dusty floor.

"They forgot to put water an' towels in my room," he said as he went toward the door. "See you downstairs?" Without waiting for any kind of an answer he slammed the door behind him and tramped back to his own room.

Mesquite sighed as he stared at the empty pitcher and

the wet and now muddy towel. He arose and put on his hat, adjusting it carefully. Then he felt for his trousers with one searching foot, hooked them to him, and drew them on. Removing his hat, he slipped into his shirt, replaced the hat, and then reached for socks and boots.

"Purty early to get up," suggested Red, worming under the sheet and snuggling down. Late sleeping was a luxury denied him on the ranch, and he was overlooking no part of this holiday. After the last few nights of sleeping on the ground, even a straw and bunchgrass mattress felt very good.

Mesquite sneered and finished dressing.

"With a saw-mill in this room an' a steamboat whistle in the next, I've had all the *sleepin'* I want. Turn out when yo're ready; I'm goin' downstairs for some water an' a towel."

"Bring some back with you," said Red, lazily.

"I don't aim to come back," growled Mesquite. "Get it yoreself."

Red grunted, spread himself over the whole bed, drew the sheet up over his face to keep the light out of his eyes and the flies off his nose, stretched ecstatically, and was asleep before Mesquite reached the bottom of the stairs.

The bartender nodded a surly good-morning, but from the kitchen came a sound of frizzling and squizzling which told of frying eggs, and the tempting smell of frying ham filled the room. Pushing back from a satisfying breakfast, Mesquite was about to pay his bill when he checked himself. If he paid it his friends

might suspect that he had left, and might lose no time in hunting for his trail; if he did not pay it, but left that little ceremony for them to attend to, they would hang around waiting for him to return. The longer they waited the better he would be suited.

"Reckon I'll take a little ride around an' see what this town looks like," he said, and carelessly went toward the stairs to get his rifle and saddle. Red stirred, mumbled something, and went back to sleep again as the door closed softly after his departing friend. Lanky was fussing around in his room, his door half closed, and paid no attention to the sounds in the hall.

Several trails led from Broken Wheel, some faint, some deeply scored in the hard soil. From careless talk Mesquite had overheard the evening before, one of these trails interested him enough to cause him to choose it in preference to any of the others. It led down the slope toward the north end of the valley, away from the great masses of broken hills, buttes, wild canyons, and tangled ravines behind the town. The country that he turned his back on was, by rights, his hunting ground; but no harm would be done if it were entered deviously; and, besides, being his logical hunting ground, to it would ride Red and Lanky as soon as they were certain that he had deserted them; they would ride to it with the directness of hounds on a hot scent.

Mile after mile he put behind him, riding at a pace that his horse could keep up for hours on end, following the winding and twisting trail as it led around buttes,

over hills, and down gentle valleys, the country opening out more as the miles passed. Fixed habitations he shunned, knowing nothing of their owners. He was looking for the range outfit of the Bar-W herd, hoping that it was the same Bar-W and outfit that he had seen near Ogalalla not many weeks before; the Bar-W whose wrangler and drag-man had been killed in that town on the South Platte, and whose murders he had avenged in his own peculiar way.

He pushed up on the top of a little divide and saw faint, dark lines of timber against the horizon on two sides of him, marking the courses of streams that never went dry. Down in his country most of the streams went dry in the summer, and he could not help but marvel a little over these northern creeks. Before him lay a wide range, more broken than the lower prairies, but well covered with a deceptive, bunched grass of magic fattening qualities. Here and there a butte thrust up from the plain, sloping at the base where detritus prophesied its ultimate end. Between two buttes the plain was freckled with cattle, and a larger spot indicated the outfit's cook wagon. Here and there whitish spots on the ground told where the bone hunters had overlooked the skeletons of buffalo, and the passing years had crumbled them back into the original lime. At the base of a steep-walled ravine the ground was thickly covered with the disintegrating bones, mutely telling the wise observer that this little precipice had been an Indian slaughter-trap, where herd after herd had been stampeded over the brink to die in deep

masses below. With dried bones selling at forty dollars a ton at the railroad, quite a sum here had been overlooked. This country had been the home of the Crows, but in later years was the treaty empire of the Sioux, who slaughtered buffalo as recklessly as the whites they accused of the same crime.

The cook wagon grew steadily larger, and by the time Mesquite drew up alongside it, the lonesome cook was grinning his welcome. He reached for the coffee-pot and kicked the embers of the fire together, fanning them with his hat. While he worked, he talked.

"Set awhile, stranger; feel like some coffee myself, an' you might as well join me. Been comin' far?"

"Farther'n you," said Mesquite, smiling, although there was no need to lead the cook on.

"Don't want to bet on it, do you?" demanded the cook, in high hope, as he dug into a trouser pocket and drew out a respectable roll of bills. "Give you two to one you ain't."

"Well, I've come a long way," said Mesquite, dismounting and sitting down in the shade of the wagon. He grinned exasperatingly. The wagon looked very familiar to him, with its wide southern tread.

"That's all right," said the cook, adding a few sticks to the glowing coals, and blowing with renewed energy. "I'm bettin' I've come farther."

"But if them Goliad mares had had their own way, you wouldn't 'a' come near as far," chuckled Mesquite.

The cook's mouth opened in astonishment as he turned his head to stare at this stranger. What did

*he* know about the Goliad mares? Who was he? Why, this stranger might have come as far as himself, or even farther. As he thought about the mares, he could not keep from coupling the murdered wrangler to them, and his face grew grave. The wrangler had hated those mares and their persistent and bull-headed efforts to return to the country of their first-born, and the way they had tried to take the rest of the cavy with them. But how did this stranger know anything about them?

"Reckon yo're as fur from home as I am, stranger," admitted the cook; "or mebby you heard about them damn mares some'ers south of Ogalalla?"

"I passed yore outfit an' herd between the Republican an' South Platte," said Mesquite. "Me an' my two friends. Campbell tried to swap the mares off on us. Did you get the message we sent after you, about Campbell's death? An' the death of Billy-of-the-drag?"

The cook slowly arose and held out his hand, his face beaming.

"We did; an' some of the boys went back to clean the slate," he said, pumping Mesquite's hand energetically. "They heard all about the rest of it, too; how you busted the spirit of that murderin' deppity an' chased him outa town. But," he said in great earnestness, "why didn't you *shoot* him, 'stead of just scarin' him nigh to death? You could 'a' done it, easy."

Mesquite told him why, and with a tin cup of smoking coffee in their hands, and biscuits made with baking powder that very morning, they sat and talked, swapped tobacco, and admired each other generally. After

awhile the cook looked under the wagon and waved a thumb in the direction of his glance

"Here comes the boss; he'll be plumb tickled to see you, Jenkins; *all* the boys will be."

The boss rode around the wagon and dismounted in its shortening shadow, his eyes on the stranger, and a puzzled expression on his face.

Mesquite nodded and arose.

"Last time I saw you, you was ridin' back down the Old Western Cattle Trail after lookin' at the ford at Ogalalla," he said. "I thought you was aimin' to deliver this herd some'ers, an' get it off yore hands?"

The foreman smiled.

"I remember you now. Well, we're still on our way to deliver it; but we got orders to summer graze it, an' not to turn it up till fall. The range is so good right here that we're holdin' 'em here, workin' north as we clean it. Where are yore friends? There was three of you, warn't they?"

The cook cut in, bursting with his news.

"This here is the feller that chased that murderin' deppity marshal out of Ogalaller for killin' Campbell an' Billy, an' sent us the word that they was killed. Damn pity he didn't kill that deppity, though."

The foreman stepped forward and held out his hand, his face beaming with pleasure.

"I'm shore proud to meet you, friend; I heard all about you, back in Ogalalla. How's yore friend?"

Mesquite told him of the ambush, and the reasons for his own riding, and found his companions in hearty sympathy with him. He told them of his present

quandary: his entire ignorance of the broken country near Broken Wheel, and the probable points of rendezvous of the men he sought.

"When I learned that there was a Bar-W trail herd summer grazin' up this way, an' a little gossip about it, I figgered there was a chance that it was the one I'd seen on the Platte. I dassn't ask questions of strangers, not knowin' what they might be; but I figgered that you fellers would tell me all you could of what you know about this part of th' country. I want the coyotes that shot Hopalong; an' I'm after 'em just like you went back to get that murderin' dog that killed yore friends."

The Bar-W foreman nodded his understanding, and then shook his head.

"We'd be glad to tell you what you want to know, but we don't know anythin' about this country except right around here. We've all stuck to the open range, barrin' that hell-hole of a town back yonder. I'll lend you half of my outfit to scour that mess of hills; but I can't tell you nothin' about 'em."

The cook leaned forward eagerly.

"Take him over to that Double-U outfit, an' back him up; them fellers belong up here an' know this country like you know the Concho. They can tell him a lot if they know who they're talkin' to." He grinned. "Us Texans are a long way from home, an' we shore oughta stick together."

The foreman quit pulling the stems of a bunch of grass, and arose from his squatting position.

"Mebby we won't have to go that far," he said.

"We've got a local man out with the herd. We'll be ridin' his way, anyhow."

Mesquite cogitated for a moment.

"Ain't shore I want him to see me, or know anythin' about me," he replied. "How long has he been ridin' for you?"

"Near a month," answered the foreman.

"Then that lets him out of bein' one of the gang I'm after; but he might be friendly with it," Mesquite growled. "Huh! I got an idea millin' in my head; wait a little, till it untangles." After a moment he looked earnestly at his companions, and spoke again. "I'll talk to this man of yourn, *after* I talk with that Double-U crowd. We'll ride wide of yore herd an' yore men, an' stop on our way back. Cookie," he said, smiling a little, "if you want to do me a favour, you tell anybody that rides up and asks about me that I'm a stranger tryin' to find the shortest an' best trail to Fort Buford. You can tell 'em the truth afterwards, mebby."

Cookie nodded and watched his companions swing into the saddle; and as they rode away he examined his store of firewood and glanced thoughtfully at the fringe of timber along the distant creek. The nights were becoming crisp and his duty was plain; but loyalty to this man who had taken up the quarrel of the two dead Bar-W men came first in his thoughts: if the outfit grumbled at the smallness of the night's fire, then they could roll up in their blankets earlier than usual and learn a lesson having to do with the reckless burning of wood that they did not have to supply. He was glad that in the after life there would be no fuel to rustle

and quarrel about: according to his teachings, Heaven needed no fires, and hell burned brimstone, and no matter where he was billed for he would be ahead of the game to that extent. Besides, if they hadn't thrown the herd so far off the trail he could use chips for cooking, and let the outfit collect its own fuel for a flaming fire, if they wanted one.

Mesquite followed his companion on a course well to the north of the Bar-W herd, on whose southern side rode the local man. They rode past the north end of the western butte, climbed several small divides between dried-up creeks, and went along the curving slope of a ridge of hills. Passing through a gap in these they saw another herd lazily grazing. This was a herd of select beef cattle, putting on the finishing weight for a slow and lazy drive to the nearest railroad shipping pens, where they would be put in cars and sent east by train. In all his life Mesquite had never seen a herd of eight hundred beeves so heavy and so uniform in size and quality. Half Durham, half Texan, the mother strain was so well hidden that he would not, on the wildest guess, have thought that the mothers of these cattle had come up from Texas, a bunch of wild, lean, long-horn animals of singular angularity. The first generation of the cross-breed lost almost all of the visible signs of the mother; but the strength and virility and the power of resistance of the long-horn were not lost.

They rode lazily forward, the contented cattle not giving them a glance unless they rode too close. A horseman could ride among them with impunity; but a man on foot would have been in grave peril. A

stocky, black-haired man rode to meet them, gesturing easily and swiftly. To Mesquite it looked like aimless affectation; but to the Bar-W foreman it offered a chance to practise in a language he had almost forgotten. His gestured reply was slow and awkward, and the other, repeating his message by laboriously gesturing each component unit, smiled at the slow answer. After a little more gesturing the stranger turned his attention to Mesquite, regarding him curiously.

"Bell says yo're on the warpath, a friend, an' lookin' for sign," said the foreman of the Double-U herd, his seamed face crinkling into a fine network of lines. "We have a little trouble talkin', his bein' Comanche an' mine Crow; an', besides, I was brought up in the talk, an' he warn't. Some of his signs warn't used much up in the north; but we do right well, considerin'."

Something about the features of the Double-U foreman backed up his statement that he had been brought up in the sign language; his mouth, his cheek bones, the shape of his nose. The man had been born in a skin lodge under the great log pickets of Old Fort Laramie, before adobe took their place, and he was one out of hundreds who had made good in the white man's way. Physically, the Indian strain was not as plain as it might have been, and in character it showed still less. He listened to all that Mesquite had to say, and at the conclusion he swung down from his saddle and with the point of a knife traced a map on the ground, placing landmarks as he described them, his hands as busy as his lips.

Bell watched him with an amused smile on his face,

knowing that this map-maker was going into details so necessary to the white man's comprehension, and so unnecessary to one of his own kind. He was as patient as the teacher of a kindergarten, the eloquence of his swiftly moving hands entirely lost on both of his companions. He spoke of a day's journey, and checked himself, smiling at the persistence of habit. Here was a mind that thought both in the symbolism of the savage and in the abstractions of the white man; but the white man's way of thinking was but a layer superimposed on those of first impressions, and those earlier and more plastic tablets of the mind were more deeply graven. Mesquite was amazed by the amount of information he obtained from that hurried map, and doubted if his memory could carry, unconfused, the identifying features of the landscape and its landmarks. In this foreman's mind the leaning of a tree, the relative distance between two rocks, the background views were plainly distinguishing marks beyond the possibility of confusion. For the first time in his life Mesquite felt the embarrassment of a tenderfoot.

After a little desultory conversation Mesquite and his friend rode off, this time going south of the range of hills, to come up to the Bar-W herd on the side nearest town.

"I'm goin' to learn that sign-language," Mesquite suddenly remarked, seeing a great light. Hopalong and Red, all the way up from the south on that long ride over the old cattle trail, weeks before, had made many gestures which now stood revealed in their true

nature. The two red-heads might have discussed him very frankly under his very nose.

Bell laughed in genuine enjoyment.

"Looks easy, don't it?" he said. "You'll change yore tune, though, when you come to tackle it. It'll take a lot of hard work an' a long time, an' if you do get the hang of it in a stumblin' kind of way, who'll you talk to? If you don't use it you'll forget it. Better get a good trailer to teach you to see an' read sign. That feller back there can start out now, go to Broken Wheel, pick up the sign of one of them fellers an' foller it right smack to the man that made it. Anyhow, to talk the sign language, you've got to think in it, like an Injun. It ain't worth the effort, these days." He stroked his chin. "Now readin' tracks an' follerin' a trail comes in right handy for a man spendin' his life with cattle; 'specially in a country like this, where there's as many cattle thieves as there are honest folks."

Mesquite chuckled.

"I know trailin'," he replied. "But if I follered that trail from Broken Wheel it would put me in plain sight of them; an' they'll be watchin' for me. What I want to do is to get away from Red an' Lanky, get into the hills without bein' seen, an' know where to head for without wastin' a lot of time. When I strike the signs of the feller that got away from Broken Wheel, the one Red shot, I'll know 'em unless he changes cayuses. There's yore herd, through that gap. Now we'll have a look at that feller you was tellin' me about."

The rider in question watched the two approach, and

as they drew near to him his appraising eyes discovered something disturbingly familiar in the younger man. Then Mesquite's horse, cavorting skittishly at sight of the bleached and crumbling skull of a buffalo, whirled until the brand on its side stood revealed to the sight of the herder. He sat suddenly erect in the saddle and glanced toward a high peak in the hills to the southwest.

Mesquite glanced toward his companion and spoke in a low voice.

"Never saw him before; he ain't one of 'em."

"Glad to hear it," replied Bell, and spoke a little louder, in a careless voice. "We're holdin' 'em here as long as the grass holds out, an' then we drift slow toward the ranch. Best summer range I ever saw, all of it." He nodded to the herder, exchanged a few words with him, and went on toward the wagon, Mesquite riding beside him.

The herder watched them go and then, kneeing his horse, rode swiftly back and forth several times for a hundred feet each way, not for an instant taking his eyes from the two, and ready to check his horse to a normal pace if they chanced to look back. Far off, on the high peak of the hills, a rider might have been seen to emerge into sight and repeat the herder's actions; he might have been seen by every man on the range had they known where to look or had they expected such a thing. Only three men saw him and his signal: the herder whose riding had caused this answer; Lanky Smith, from his vantage point halfway between the two signallers; and the half-breed foreman, who chanced

to be looking toward the peak when the answer was made. The latter pondered for a moment or two, spoke to one of his men, and rode slowly eastward toward the trail from Bell's camp to Broken Wheel.

Mesquite, tarrying a few minutes at the chuck wagon, mounted and rode off in the direction of town, intending to go around it through the broken country farther east, and to strike into the tangled mass of hills and gorges from the south, a direction from which he would not be expected. He had ridden to within three or four miles of the place where he intended to turn off the trail, when he pushed up out of a dry ravine and caught sight of a horseman approaching him at an angle, following a faint trail on the eastern slope of a steep bank, and one which joined the main trail farther on. It was the half-breed foreman, loping innocently to town on the excuse of laying in a supply of tobacco.

The two riders met at the junction of the trails and rode on together for a few minutes without doing more than to nod at each other. Then the foreman smiled a little and turned sidewise in his saddle.

"Out of tobacco," he said in explanation of his ride. "Don't look around yet, but when I get through talkin', let yore gaze travel around the whole horizon as I point it out; an' when I use two fingers instead of one, look extra close. After you left me I saw a feller move into sight on Split Top, an' ride back an' forth several times. He was ridin' fast, which is an old Injun danger signal. At the end of it he got off his horse an' pretended to hide." He paused for Mesquite's reply, but obtaining nothing more than a grunt, he continued: "If he'd

stayed in the saddle, that would 'a' meant for his friends to collect together around him; pretendin' to hide that-a-way, told them to scatter."

Mesquite smiled coldly and his eyes glinted.

"Glad to hear that," he growled. "If I knowed the country right well, I'd just as soon find 'em all together, an' save a lot of time an' work; but, not knowin' it, pickin' 'em up one at a time suits me better. What was you sayin' about that horizon?"

The foreman checked his mount, forcing it against that of his companion, and together they turned slowly, almost as though on a pivot. The foreman's extended arm and hand indicated a point far to the southeast and slowly moved as the animals moved, sweeping the horizon. Here or there he paused, as though he were explaining or pointing out something of interest. Passing along the northern arc, the arm moved down the western, Mesquite following it closely with his eyes. As the extended hand came to Split Top, the second finger flicked out along the first, and flicked back again, against the palm. The movement of the arm had not been checked, but kept on its slow sweeping motion. When it at last returned to the southeast, where it had started from, the arm dropped, and the two men rode on again at a lope.

"That was Split Top, where the signaller was," said the foreman. "You better turn east about here, an' keep out of sight of town." Again his arm pointed eastward as though aiding in the giving of detailed instructions. "That feller up on Split Rock was too far away to recognize you or yore hoss, even if he had

good glasses. You was only a horseman to him; but he signalled danger, an' scatter. The only way that he could 'a' knowed that you meant danger was that somebody told him. Bitter Root Joe is workin' for Bell. He's the only man from these parts that is. I got idears about Bitter Root, an' I'll wait back yonder in that ravine till he comes along trailin' you. When he does come along I'll be so cussed friendly an' eager to buy him a drink in town that he'll have to come along with me an' drink it. With Bitter Root, three drinks is the beginnin' of a flood; an' I'll see that he gets them three, an' a-plenty more. So-long, an' good luck."

Mesquite exchanged grins with the half-breed, whirled, and rode eastward, leaving that capable person to spike the guns of Bitter Root Joe, and to sink Bitter Root's ship in liquor. That he was successful in this may be gathered from the fact that Bitter Root reached Broken Wheel an anxious and sober man, the bearer of warnings, but within an hour had started out on a spree which lasted a week, and in which was totally submerged all thought of delivering the news that had taken him from the outfit of the Bar-W.

## CHAPTER XI

### STALKING STALKERS

LANKY SMITH, lying in the brush along the top of a ravine until the signaller on Split Top had disappeared from his sight, waited a little longer and then slid down the bank, ran to his picketed horse, and rode eastward along the bottom of the ravine, taking great pains not to show himself to any watcher on Split Top. Coming to a steep-walled pass between two buttes, he followed it for half a mile, turned into a narrow, dead-end chasm, and dismounted beside a partly opened pack.

Red Connors stepped from behind an angle in the wall, lowered his gun, and grinned.

"Learn anythin'?" he asked, hopefully.

"Learned a heap," grunted Lanky, taking out tobacco and papers for a smoke long denied. He lazily rolled and lit a cigarette, and smiled at his impatient, red-haired friend. "Learned a heap," he repeated. "Added to what we've found out a'ready, an' what we suspect, I reckon mebby we can start, come evenin'."

"See Mesquite?" persisted Red, breaking a few dry branches for a fire. He carefully arranged them like the spokes of a wheel, struck a match, and reached for the coffee-pot as the flames licked greedily upward. The

pot placed exactly as he wanted it, he looked up and glanced at his friend.

"Yep; I saw him," answered Lanky. "So did everybody else that wanted to. He's mebby goin' to be useful, Red, keepin' them fellers' attention on himself, an' off of us. There's a funny peak over yonder," his gesture roughly indicated the southwest. "Looks like a Mex. hat that's been split down through the crown. Sticks up above all the rest of the hills. Reckon a man can see, an' be seen, a mighty long ways from it. Feller up on top of it rode Injun sign for danger, an' he got off his cayuse to hide for a minute. Know what that means?"

"Reckon I'm a plain damn fool?" snorted Red, who had been brought up in the Comanche and Apache country.

"Well, I wouldn't want to bet ag'in *that*," placidly replied Lanky. "Here, now: you listen to me. I got hold of an idear," and straightway Lanky endeavoured to prove his words. At the end of his talk Red slid a frying pan over the blaze and dropped some bacon in it.

"Makes me laugh," chuckled the red-head, wincing as a spatter of hot grease barely missed an eye. He chuckled again as he smeared the grease over a countenance which had been greasy enough without the addition. "Mesquite's tryin' plumb hard to get shet of us, sneakin' away like he done this mornin'." He broke an egg on the edge of the pan and dropped its contents into the sizzling grease at one side of the bacon, careless as to where it spread. "If he only knowed how hard we're hopin' that he don't stumble acrost us, he'd be plumb disgusted."

Lanky grinned cheerfully and opened his huge pocket knife.

"He shore would," he said, and reached toward the frying pan. "He's a good Kid, just the same."

Red grunted. "Yes; but only a kid."

Dawn broke swiftly over the hills, almost magically. A man unrolled his blankets and emerged from the woollen cocoon to stretch and to rub himself briskly. The night air had been chill and penetrating, and he had not allowed himself the luxury of a fire at his feet. Bone-dry wood made an almost smokeless fire, and his rough-and-ready breakfast was soon cooked and eaten. Lower down in the ravine, passing the little rocky bench on which he had spent the night, were the tracks of two horses, leading westward toward the inner and more complicated labyrinth of canyons and hills. The view of the camper was closely restricted by the surrounding walls, and to make certain of his bearings he climbed the canyon wall, taking advantage of every bit of cover that offered. Reaching the top, he located Split Top and made his way down again. Disappearing in the brush that masked the bottom of a small gully, he found his grazing horse, removed its hobbles, saddled it, led it back under the rocky bench, and soon was riding on his way, following the plain and tell-tale tracks westward, on the trail of another of Hopalong's ambushers. An hour later he drew up sharply and frowned. The tracks split, one set turning off into a branch canyon, and the other going straight ahead. Dismounting, he dropped to hands and knees and carefully examined

them. The marks of the worn caulks of one set of shoes, differing but a trifle from those of the other set, decided the matter for him, and he pushed straight ahead. Another hour passed, and again he drew up sharply, to stare in pugnacious disgust at another track which appeared from a north-lying canyon and joined the one he had been following. The new prints were the fresher and partly obliterated the others. Again dismounting and dropping to his hands and knees, he spent a few minutes in close scrutiny. The new tracks were different from those which had turned off a mile or two behind him.

"Well," he growled, "findin' 'em two at a clip will save time an' a lot of ridin'." A blade of grass, moving slowly upward as its pinning burden of sand, drying with the sunlight, slid from it, caught his eye. There had been dew the night before. He let a hand drop to his holster at this indication of proximity of the maker of that fresh track, and carefully scanned the canyon ahead. As he moved back to mount again, the ears of his horse swung forward, and he swiftly grasped the animal's nostrils to check an inquiring whinny. For a moment he stood thus, and then leading the horse among some boulders, drew its head down and tied the reins to the hock of a foreleg. Not satisfied with this precaution, he rigged a side-line hobble, took his rifle, and slipped away in the brush, moving slowly and cautiously, and pausing often to listen. Time passed swiftly as he continued his slow advance, and then he froze, listening intently.

The sounds came again, intermittently: whisking

sounds, interspersed with a gentle cropping noise. Somewhere very close to him a horse was grazing. Dropping to hands and knees, and dispensing with the rifle, he crawled forward, and then froze again. An indistinct, moving object, seen through the tangle of intervening brush, caught his eye. It was the side of a roan horse. Here and there sounded the fall of pebbles from the canyon wall, and from the distance came the chirp of a bird. A gentle gust of wind swept through the canyon, rustling the grass and leaves.

A scene more peaceful could hardly be found; yet, on either side of him, Death might be lurking. Curious as to the identity of the grazing horse, he dared not move in its direction to get a good look at it, for he thrilled to a strong premonition of danger. Lanky Smith rode a roan horse; but so did many other men. A warning *whir-r-r* twenty feet ahead of him, the angry buzzing of a rattler's tail, made him hug the ground. Was the snake warning him or someone else? The shrill clatter of a chipmunk, warning its tribe, sounded above him on an earth-covered bench. Craning his neck, he tried to see the snake, but failed; and a grim smile came to his face. Up to now he never had credited rattlers with even the shadow of a right to exist; but this one had put him under an obligation. Again came the shivery warning, persistent and continued; and a dried stick cracked sharply, accompanied by a barely audible curse. The sound of a striking rock was followed by a thrashing among dried leaves, and Mesquite grinned coldly as the angry whirring grew slowly less. The

rattler was dead, but in dying had laid the way for vengeance.

Colt in hand, Mesquite waited for this crawling man who had had to kill the snake that barred his progress. The gentle sounds of leather being dragged over wind-swept sandstone grew plainer, and Mesquite held his breath lest in breathing he should give warning of the nearness of his presence. Steadily the softly rubbing sound grew, and nearer wriggled the wearer of those chaps. Here was a game worth while, compensating for the risk. The smaller end of a prostrate branch jiggled in the brush where it lay, and stopped suddenly as the dragging sounds ceased. Overhead a sailing hawk came in sight against the rectangular patch of sky, dropped swiftly toward the chipmunk on the bench, and then whirled higher in sudden panic and darted out of sight above the canyon rim. Mesquite slowly and noiselessly turned the muzzle of his Colt toward the left-hand side of the boulder he lay behind and pushed the weapon a few inches forward; and as it stopped it almost touched the nose of a face which suddenly appeared at the corner of the boulder.

Lanky Smith shrank from the threatening muzzle, and then his jaw dropped in swift relief at sight of the owner of the weapon; but his relief was indicated only by expression, for his language caused the Recording Angel to cover her ears and shudder. Forgetting all else in the surge of feeling occasioned by this unexpected meeting with the man he had thought miles away and hopelessly out of the game, Lanky bounced to his feet,

as though he could swear better when standing erect. Mesquite arose more slowly, almost stunned by the appearance of his friend; and before he could reply to the caustic torrent issuing from his friend's lips, there came the rock-thrown crash of a heavy rifle and Lanky dropped to his knees, senselessly clawing at the ground.

With the crash of the rifle, Mesquite's hand moved in a blur and his answer merged into the rolling echoes of the heavier weapon. Twenty feet up the face of the south wall, where a thinning cloud of gray-white smoke streaked upward in the up-draft from the canyon, there came a shower of pebbles and sand pushed from the ledge by a slowly moving object. This object slid to the edge, one end of it, hatless, pushed out over the void below, gathered speed as the rest of the body followed it, and plunged downward, the booted feet spreading apart and making a momentary Y.

On his hands and knees before his own smoke cloud had thinned, Mesquite dragged his friend behind the boulder and rolled him over on his back; but before he could examine the bloody wound on the head of the prostrate man, Lanky opened his eyes, blinked into the face bending over him, and continued his profane monologue from where he had been interrupted.

Mesquite grinned from swift relief, drew his right-hand gun, pushed the empty shell from its cylinder, and mechanically shoved in a fresh one.

"You shouldn't 'a' been called Lanky," he observed with great irony. "They should 'a' made it *Lucky*."

And thereupon ensued a wrangle which prophesied

well for the growth of confidence and friendship between these two cheerful fools.

At a sound from the rear Mesquite whirled like a flash, a Colt appearing like a miracle in his capable right hand.

"Don't shoot," snapped Lanky with deep feeling. "That's Red, the damn fool, a-trailin' *you*." He raised his voice. "Hey, you idjut: it's *us:* don't shoot!"

"Who's an idjut?" demanded Red, crawling into sight from the left. He gazed at the bloody welt on his friend's head, scowled at Mesquite, and then leaned against a boulder and laughed.

Lanky, his face smeared with blood, let his scowl die out and make place for a grin.

"What's so damn funny?" he inquired, sheepishly. "We got Dan Slade, didn't we?"

"*We?*" inquired Red, holding his ribs. "*We?*" he repeated with a rising inflection. "My Gawd, but yo're dumb!"

"That so?" snapped Lanky. "You was follerin' the Kid; the Kid was follerin' me; but *I* was follerin' Slade. Understand English, you carrot-headed jackass?"

"A lot of good it would 'a' done you, if the Kid hadn't been settin' almost on yore head," retorted Red, indignantly. "He saved yore life, 'though he didn't save an awful lot."

Lanky looked reflectively at Mesquite, the saver of his life. He carefully wiped away some blood that threatened to flow into his eye and interfere with vision.

"Hey, Kid," he said, accusingly. "*I* paid for yore breakfast: you owe me a dollar!"

## CHAPTER XII

### TRICKS OF THE DARK

IN THE beginning Mesquite Jenkins had cherished the belief that he had been assigned to a one-man job, but now he knew better and took no pains to disguise his disgust. It was not that he did not like his companions; on the contrary, he had the disturbing feeling that he liked them very much, and that he was going to be unfortunate enough to like them more. The whole Bar-20 outfit, or what was left of it, made him grin; and he had found himself warming to the squabbling crowd in a manner to cause him alarm. He knew, also, that he could not warm to any better collection of he-humans; but all this was aside from the point: they were cutting into a game which he had been assured would be a one-man affair, and that he was that one man. Already he and Red had saved each other's lives, and he had killed the man who had dropped Lanky with a shot through his scalp. Lanky's head was bound up until he resembled a Turk, and by generally accepted standards Lanky should have been considered out of action for some little time; but one could not judge Lanky by common standards. With a neat, long crease in his scalp, and his head splitting with a throbbing ache, Lanky was still among those present and

was riding doggedly toward any common adventure with his companions, vitalized by a grit which demanded and earned Mesquite's admiration. He didn't even have the decency to show signs of fever and thus provide both of his friends with the excuse to take him to town and leave him there. When they looked his way he grinned cheerfully; when they looked away, he cursed under his breath, and gripped the saddle a little tighter.

Here was a problem of individual rights so complicated that to insist upon strict observance of the powers invested in Mesquite would be to abuse other individual rights, honestly earned. Both of these pests had assured Mesquite that he was foreman of the expedition and then both of them had tried to run it. While Mesquite was debating the whole vexing matter, and wondering how he could get rid of his companions, Red Connors pulled up.

"Good place, right here, to cook supper," said Red, wise in the ways of the plains. Red's statement was not made in the humbleness with which a subordinate is supposed to address a superior. He stated the fact flatly, in his well-known way.

Mesquite looked around appraisingly. They were in the middle of a small mountain pasture, not more than two miles in diameter, through which ran a trickle of good water. Several miles farther on in its course the trickle disappeared in the sand and was seen no more, a small area of salt grass and alkali marking its burial place. The rises of the pasture were gentle, with long slopes; but the whole situation lay under the

sight of any one who should top the hills of its circumference.

"Hobble the cayuses after they drink," said Red, handing the bridle reins of his own horse to the petulant Lanky as an indication that the latter was selected to play the rôle of wrangler. "Hobble 'em short, so we can throw 'em for a three-cornered breastwork in case of a ruckus," continued Red, in sketchy explanation. He fussed at the blanket rolls and produced a few culinary utensils, and dropped the latter to the ground. Dumping the blankets upon them, he glanced at the near bank of the little wash, where small drift had stranded from the last freshet, and then looked at Mesquite.

"Rustle some firewood, Kid, while I get the grub, an' we'll soon feel better."

Mesquite thoughtlessly handed the reins of his own horse to Lanky, who took them without verbal expostulations and led the animals toward the creek, downstream from the camp site.

"What you campin' out here in the open for?" asked Mesquite, not giving the distant and scattered firewood a glance.

"Ambushers is like Injuns," answered Red, condescendingly. "Don't reckon yo're hardly old enough to know much about Injuns from experience; but I've been up ag'in a few scalp peelers in my time, an' I've learned a few lessons. If you want to make Injuns happy, make yore camp in a lot of cover. First thing you know they're all around you an' plumb on top of you; an' yo're dead before you can grab a gun.

Make 'em come to you acrost the open an' they don't hanker for you near as strong. There's three of us an' at least eight of them murderin' skunks. If we give 'em cover to stalk in there'll be eight of them an' none of us, come mornin'."

Mesquite nodded slowly, his own ideas fully endorsed by his companion. It would take a very valiant eight to charge across the open against three such riflemen. He was entirely willing that they try it. He walked slowly to the bank of the creek to collect the wood, and when he returned with an armful he found Red busily mixing self-raising flour with water from his canteen. While Red prepared the flapjacks, Mesquite built up the wood Indian fashion, with the sticks crossed in the middle so that the ends could be pushed in as the fire needed them. He then sliced some bacon, and silently handed the coffee-pot to Lanky as that person made his awkward way to his companions. Lanky looked from the pot to Mesquite, started to make a profane inquiry, checked it, puffed out his cheeks in silent disgust and, taking the pot, continued in his assignment as chore boy.

"Don't rile the water when you fill it," cautioned Red, pleasantly, whereupon Lanky, with overflowing exuberance kicked a pebble neatly over the stream.

The supper cooked and eaten in silence, Mesquite lighted a cigarette and arose, facing the close-hobbled animals.

"Reckon it's time we shift," he said. Being leader of this small war party he felt somewhat responsible for its safety. "If they spot us, and wait till after dark,

they can slip up an' pot us," he suggested, but without much interest. "Might be a good idear to make 'em hunt around a little, an' waste time."

"They shore will hunt around," replied Red, "an' they shore will waste time. When it gets dusk, we shift like you said. We're all through with a fire now, an' a dark camp is sometimes hard to find."

Lanky stretched lazily and patted his comfortable stomach, discounting his throbbing head; but he was painfully aware of the wound and, it seemed, craved full payment for it.

"Me, personal, favours a nice little fire, Injun make, that don't spread much light," he drawled. "A little fire can be seen a long ways, an' draws vermin. We'll build a little fire, make dummies outa our blankets, an' set up all night in easy rifle shot of the camp. I won't sleep much, anyhow; an' I'm as pizen mad as a scotched rattler. If you fellers are sleepy you can trust me to watch the camp."

"They won't bite so easy," deprecated Mesquite; "but I'm willin' if Red is."

"It's goin' to be dark to-night," said Red; "look at those clouds." He considered a moment. "If we do that then there ain't no use of shiftin'. If we stay here, where do you figger to lay?"

"In the creek bed," answered Lanky. "Them steep walls of the wash will give 'em a good way to get up right close. We'll picket the cayuses between the fire an' the creek, so they'll stand out plain for me to see in case anybody tries to run 'em off an' leave us afoot."

"Huh!" snorted Mesquite, putting himself in the place of a stalker of the camp. "If that Shanghai feller is with 'em he won't let nobody use the wash. Too much like a baited trap. It's the best way to get near the camp, an' he won't be fool enough to use it. He'll figger it'll be guarded. An' wherever you picket the cayuses will tell 'em how to figger where the watcher is."

Red looked at the speaker with an air of respect. "Where would you put 'em, Kid?"

"Let 'em graze till late, an' then picket 'em near the wash. Sometimes the most dangerous place is the safest. An' if we put 'em there, they'll mebby figger we're close by keepin' watch over 'em, an' that we've put 'em between us an' the fire, where we can see 'em easy."

"Kid, I shore can see where we're goin' to have fine times together, us three," said Red, unknowingly placing another difficulty in front of Mesquite and his nebulous plans for slipping away from them and taking up the search single-handed. He chuckled. "Hoppy shore would enjoy this. Wish he was well enough to take a hand with us."

Mesquite idly toyed with the button of his coat. Both of his companions were old-time friends of Hopalong, friends of years instead of weeks; and as such they had rights which could not be entirely disregarded. He did not stop to consider that he was now beginning to give heed to the just claims of others, that he was beginning to allow himself to become more of a social animal. Then and there he decided to stay with them

until the separation would be a natural and not a forced one; but he reserved the right to out-guess them if he could.

Lanky, prodded constantly by pain, was in no sentimental mood; his mind was strictly practical.

"How you goin' to make the dummies in the blankets?" he demanded, seeking aid in a matter which had baffled him.

Mesquite smiled.

"Saw piles of tumbleweed against the bank in a bend of the wash," he replied. "They're round, an' they're stiff enough; an' we can crowd 'em together good enough to fool somebody at long range. I don't reckon yo're plan's goin' to work, Lanky; but I'll shore enjoy playin' it to a showdown with you. We can take turns watchin'. You need sleep more'n Red an' me, anyhow."

Lanky grumbled under his breath, but for an instant his drawn face showed a smile.

"How are we goin' to make up the dummies without them fellers seein' us, in case they're watchin'?" he asked. "If we let the fire go out, an' then light it ag'in, they'll get suspicious; an' if we don't let it go out they can see what we're doin'."

"We don't have to let it go out," said Red, thoughtfully. "Let it die down to coals, like we was careless or savin' wood, an' then build it up ag'in later. None of them fellers are careless with firewood. Or we might shift camp down into the wash an' make the dummies under cover of the banks."

Lanky snorted disgustedly.

"Only tenderfeet camp out in a wash with clouds like

them overhead," he growled. "For old-timers like us to do a fool thing like that would make 'em so suspicious that they wouldn't come within a mile of us."

Mesquite, wise in the treacherous ways of dry-washes and heavy rain clouds, nodded endorsement to Lanky's words. More than one dry-wash camp had been overwhelmed by walls of water roaring down from heavy rains on the hills. The history of the Southwest contained many such instances. Whatever they did must ring true.

"We'll let the fire die down, like Red said," he remarked, looking toward the hobbled animals. "I'll picket the cayuses nearer to the wash, an' collect the tumbleweed. When I leave, let two of our ropes get tangled in my spurs, keepin' one end of 'em here. Tie our blankets to one of 'em, so I can pull 'em to the wash. After I make the dummies, you can pull 'em back with the other rope when the fire gets low. The sage will hide 'em good enough, an' them fellers won't come within a mile of us till near midnight, an' they won't be able to see what we're doin'." He laughed gently. "It's a fool scheme; but other fool schemes have worked, an' it'll be fun tryin' it out, anyhow. We'll wait till it begins to get dark."

They killed time around the slowly dying fire, and then Mesquite arose and strolled toward the wash on his way to look after the horses; and as he walked two lariats trailed sinuously from his spurs, heel-tassels that would have made a Comanche turn green with envy; and not much later the three blankets slid smoothly and slowly across the dark earth toward the

clay banks of the wash. Darkness had fairly settled on the pasture when he began to make the dummies, and it was not long before three elongated, roughly cylindrical shapes slid gently toward the cherry-red embers of the fire. Lanky and Red, moving carelessly around the dim camp, made good use of their feet and managed to push the rolls into the proper positions without revealing by their movements just what they were engaged in. This done, they added fuel to the fire, lay down beside two of the dummies as Mesquite openly returned to the camp; and before the fire grew much brighter the three men had wriggled into the sage.

Red slipped over the bank of the dry-wash and turned to peer behind him. Through an aisle in the sage he saw the three dummies lying about the fire like spokes from a hub, and at their outer ends a saddle made a pillow for each. Something seemed to be wrong with the fire, but a knowing eye would have blamed the poor blaze and the generous smoke on moist or green wood. Overhead the heavy clouds moved draggingly along, and on the plain only the natural noises of the night and the faint sounds of grazing horses broke upon the silence.

He grinned and scratched his chin thoughtfully. "If it was anybody but Shanghai, I'd be willin' to lay odds on that stacked deck."

Lanky, very much awake, and his senses at their keenest receptivity, lay prone behind a windrow of dead tumbleweed piled by the winds against a small clump of squatty sagebrush, the fretful winking of the fire opening a narrow and faint path of vision across

the intervening ground. His rifle sights were set in the lowest notches for point-blank range and the occasional soaring flight of pain made him grimly hopeful of using them. To his left in a rain-gouged depression in the clayey soil lay Mesquite, who pinned his faith on Colt instead of rifle, feeling a greater certainty in instinctive sighting than in the deliberate lining up of eye and sights along a rifle barrel in the dark. Sights, in such a poor light, have a distressing way of diappearing with focal changes. To the right was Red, who could barely see the ivory bead of his front sight, and when he did see it, the rear one disappeared; but, notwithstanding this, Red was cheerfully optimistic and yearned for action.

Time dragged, and seemed dissociated from any fixed standard of measurement, losing its relative value. The stars which served to limit intervals were banked by the heavy clouds. Mesquite's youthful years felt the need of sleep first and he found himself keeping awake by various devices and by the sheer power of his will. He dozed once, but caught himself; and in that interval hopelessly lost all touch with the passing of time. He could not measure his lapse, although in reality it had been only a matter of seconds. In the west he caught a glimpse of a star and lost it almost immediately as the cloud gap closed again. Then he saw others, appearing and disappearing in turn, and he knew that the clouds were rifting.

There came a soft stamping from where the horses grazed, and the gentle cropping of grass ceased. The noises of moving hoofs grew, and as he wriggled toward them he heard an equine snort. He wriggled faster,

raising his body from the ground to make use of hands and knees, a Colt gripped tightly in one hand with its muzzle pointing upward to keep it free from dirt and sand. There came a sharp smack, and the drumming rumble of hoofs, and he thought he saw an upright shadow glide away to the left. He raised his head and shoulders to see better and was greeted by a stab of fire from the dark and the angry whine of a bullet over his head. His own reply seemed doubly loud, and he flattened to earth to escape a return, realizing that his enemy had him silhouetted against the campfire. The sounds of the running hoofs soon slowed and stopped, and Mesquite breathed with relief. The attempt to stampede their animals had failed because the horses had not been able to appease their hunger within the limits of their picket ropes in the time they had grazed.

Behind him sounded two distant shots from the other side of the camp, and the ricochet of one of the bullets started its slobbering whine from near the fire. It was a patent attempt to draw attention in that direction and, perhaps, to instigate a useless pursuit, and give the other riders a chance to make off with the horses. Mesquite leaped to his feet and ran in the direction of the straying animals to do what he could to guard them and keep them from being rounded up, but stopped as soon as he heard them moving restlessly about. He was too wise to press them, and in a few minutes he heard them cropping the tough, cured grass.

## CHAPTER XIII

### DIVIDED TRAILS

DAWN showed Mesquite two horses moving slowly but steadily away from the camp, grazing as they went; behind him, in the direction of the dead fire, he saw the third horse fighting its hobbles and the picket rope, the pin of the latter having become entangled in a thick clump of wiry sagebrush. He swore with relief, for now the two loose animals were no problem; there remained one horse for wrangling and there was no danger of being left afoot. While he walked back toward the clump he saw Red emerge from the wash, and soon the third horse was in capable hands.

Red stood up from removing the hobbles, and grinned.

"That was Shanghai," he said, turning to lead the horse toward the camp and a saddle. "How do you reckon he come up to the camp?"

Mesquite weighed the grin, and what he had heard of Shanghai's cunning, and he answered with assurance:

"Right plumb up the wash, like the wise old coyote he is. He figgered we wasn't fools, an' then made fools out of us."

"He did all of them things," said Red, his growing grin bespeaking a grudged admiration for the old reprobate. "Just clean out-guessed us. He figgered that we'd reckon the wash too handy to be used, that it was so invitin' an' dangerous that nobody but a fool would try to use it; and he figgered we reckoned that he was too smart to fool around a trap like that. Then he went right ahead an' used it. His tracks run along it as far as I could see."

"Are you shore them tracks was made by him?"

"Shore; because he is the only man in that gang that has sense enough to figger it all out," chuckled Red. "There was one thing he didn't figger on, however, an' no blame to him: the God-forsaken mess of hobbles on our animals. He had so many ropes to cut in the dark that it took him too long, an' you must 'a' scared him away before he had time to finish the job. How'd you ever come to hobble 'em like that?"

"Because I didn't want to walk," replied Mesquite, grinning. "They had plenty of laigs, an' I had plenty of rope. But there's one thing, Red: I never reckoned *that* old coyote would be fooled by them dummies."

"I ain't sure he was fooled," replied Red. "The way he scouted along the wash makes me figger he knowed there was somebody layin' low outside the camp some'ers. Well, I'll saddle up an' get them other cayuses while you an' Lanky get breakfast."

"Where is Lanky?" demanded Mesquite, a trace of anxiety in his voice.

"He'll be comin' along the wash from his back-trackin'," laughed Red. "I told him he wouldn't

learn nothin', but he's shore stubborn. There he is, now. Hey, *Lanky!* What'd you find out?"

"Go to hell!" said Lanky, making his way wearily toward the ashes of the fire. Then they saw him stop, stare at the ground, and heard him burst into loud and sincere profanity; and when they reached his side they added their remarks to his own. Plainly marked in the light top soil was an erratic trail. It had been made by a heavy, dragging body: Shanghai had wriggled from the wash to within a score of paces of the little campfire, and on his way back he had investigated, from the rear, the little windrow of tumblewood which had served to shelter Lanky. The rest of his trail was a lesson in woodcraft. He had located Red and then eliminated Mesquite from any near connection with the grazing horses. He had gone entirely around the animals and satisfied himself that Mesquite was not situated where he had the horses against the faint glow of the fire. Of course he did not know that Lanky lay behind the windrow, or the name of the man who occupied Red's position; he did not need to know the identity of any of them, for identity did not concern him. All he wanted to do was to locate three men. Only Mesquite's prompt reply to the restlessness of the animals had balked a very pretty lesson in horse-stealing.

"The long-headed old thief!" growled Mesquite, grinning despite himself. "An' once I had him all tied up!"

"Which is somethin' nobody else can say, Kid," soothed Red.

"Well," said Lanky, in grim satisfaction; "he's done somethin' for us, anyhow: him an' his friends have left a trail. Let's eat an' get on it."

"They have," said Mesquite, grimly. "Wrangle the cayuses, Red. I'm hungry, an' I'm shore eager to see what that trail says."

It was in mid-forenoon when Mesquite pulled up and pointed to the trail ahead of them. One set of tracks left it and went off at a slight angle, and in the next two hundred yards the heavy and carelessly made trail of eight horses frayed into seven more single strands and each of these led over hard ground, doubled and twisted through brush, entered any stream they came upon, and showed that every effort had been made to confuse pursuers.

After scouting around, the three punchers came together again and compared notes.

"No use," said Mesquite. "No man following a carefully made trail can travel as fast as the feller makin' it. They've split an' scattered, to meet again, mebby, miles away. If I knowed the country, an' somethin' about these coyotes, I might be able to figger out where they'd meet; but I don't."

Red scratched his head and ventured an opinion.

"We've got to separate, pick the plainest trail we can find, an' then foller it the best we can. They'll gain two days to our one, too."

"They will," growled Mesquite. "They ain't like Injuns, to foller a set of landmarks, so a man that knows the marks can cut acrost the bends an' get ahead of 'em. We ain't goin' to split; we're goin' to foller just one trail,

the three of us, an' save a lot of time. If they aim to come together ag'in, that one trail will get us there as quick as two more, an' it'll get us there together. One man will stick to the trail, an' the other two separate, ride ahead to the likeliest lookin' points, an' signal if they pick it up anywhere. Now we got to pick out a set of tracks that are more unusual than the others; an' there's one set back yonder that shows a crooked caulk on the nigh rear shoe. Lanky, you stick to that track like a flea to a dog. Red, you head for that notch over yonder in the sky-line. I'll ride west to that gap in the hills. They look like places they might use to get out of this valley. We watch each other's points, lookin' for the signal; Lanky watches both of 'em. Three balls of smoke is the sign. I'll show these murderin' thieves what *trackin'* is!" He pushed back his sombrero and looked at Lanky. "You watch for our smokes. If we don't find the tracks, we'll send up a single column; if we do, three puffs. If you see a column at each point, that will mean that we ain't neither of us found anythin'. In that case we'll both want to join you. So, when you see straight columns, send up one of yore own, so we can locate you *pronto*. Savvy it all?"

Lanky savvied, and said so; and soon rode along a trail that kept him swearing; and two hours later he pulled up to swear at something that made him swear worse: four horseshoes lay at the foot of a little tree, one of them showing a crooked caulk; and from that point onward his progress promised to amount to little.

He started to swing back into the saddle when he

suddenly remembered that his two friends would be looking for a track showing a crooked caulk. This they never would find, for from this place on it had ceased to exist. He collected small bits of wood and soon a single column arose, arrow-like, in the clear air. His blanket, deftly used, sent up a series of three puffs, followed by the single column, and then another series of puffs, and so on. He was mixing the signals purposely to call attention to the fact that something was wrong. While he waited he scanned the hills, and to his great surprise saw three puffs of smoke arise from the gap which Mesquite had chosen for his goal. From Red's notch arose a single column of smoke, giving the information that the pass was free from tracks.

"I knowed that smart-Aleck Kid would shuffle them signals," yelped Lanky. "How'n hell can he find tracks that ain't there?" He scowled at the distant gap, frowned at the discarded horseshoes, grabbed up the one with the crooked caulk, vaulted into the saddle and pushed through the brush as rapidly as he could toward Mesquite's gap, wrath in his eyes and language on his lips.

It was past noon when Lanky emerged from a patch of brush and started up the comparatively open slope toward the gap, where Mesquite sat against a tree and waited for him. Red's horse stood beside Mesquite's for Red had swiftly obeyed the summons; but Red, himself, was not in sight. Lanky soon stopped and glared down at the smiling youth. He pulled the horseshoe from a capacious side pocket and flung it down at the youth's side.

"I knowed you'd get tangled in them signals: take a look at that!"

Mesquite languidly picked up the shoe, examined the caulk, and then glanced up hopefully at his mounted companion. He seemed to be more pleased than surprised.

"I figgered it had been left behind," he said. "Where'd you find it?"

"How'd you come to send up three puffs of smoke?" countered Lanky.

"I was gamblin'," answered Mesquite with an assurance which Lanky took to be pure, brazen gall. "I was gamblin', seein' that the crooked caulk track didn't show; the other tracks looked familiar. Now I know I gambled on a safe thing. We've gained a lot on 'em; an' we'll gain the rest to-morrow."

"What you mean?" demanded Lanky, still suspicious.

"I mean that the tracks of eight cayuses come together between here an' the entrance of the gap, an' make one trail through it. Not findin' that caulk mark among 'em had me puzzled a little, even if it is an old trick; but now it's all clear. They had a five-hour start on us this mornin'; now they're not more than a couple of hours ahead. When I got here the dust hadn't hardly settled. They figgered it would take us a couple of days to unravel the puzzles they made; everybody knows that a man that makes a weavin' trail can move faster than the man that has to keep huntin' it all the time. With luck we ought to get up to 'em some time to-morrow."

"Huh!" snorted Lanky, convinced that his companion was right, but by no means ready to admit it. "Sounds good, *any*how. Where's Red?"

"Scoutin' on foot through the gap, smellin' around for ambushes," chuckled Mesquite. "I told him they wasn't figgerin' it was time to set an ambush, but he went ahead just the same. They won't set no ambush till they know we're close." He arose, tossed the horseshoe into a bush, and began to gather dried wood. Lanky appointed himself wrangler and, after stripping the ponies with the exception of one saddle, he picked up the coffee-pot, mounted, and rode down toward the little brook at the base of the slope, leading the other horses after him. Letting them drink their fill, he soon returned, stripped off the remaining saddle, and picketed the three animals in a thick patch of grass. It was not long before the delectable odours of frying bacon and cooking flapjacks mingled with the clean, tangy scent of the pines, than which there is no more perfect combination. The very thought of it inspires appetite, and the actuality makes patience the rarest of all human virtues. So it seemed to the poor sore man who made his weary way along the rough side of the gap, cursing high-heeled boots at almost every aching step.

Red hobbled up to the cheery fire, stood his rifle against a tree, and flopped down at the foot of it. He sighed, and tenderly felt of his aching feet.

Mesquite, having seized upon this rare opportunity to make coffee in his own way, lifted the pot from the fire, poured in the proper quantity of coffee, and set it

aside to steep. He looked at the weary Red and grinned impudently.

"Well? Find any ambushes?" he asked.

"No," sighed Red. "I found somethin' worse," he growled, scowling accusingly at the steeping coffee. "Ain't you lettin' her boil, to put some strength into her?"

"What did you find?" asked Mesquite, ignoring the challenge.

"They went an' split ag'in. We got it to do all over." He looked at Lanky and motioned toward the coffee-pot. "Stick her on the ashes."

Mesquite and Lanky swore at the same instant, the same thought in the mind of each.

"Shanghai's seen us, an' knows we're close!" exclaimed Mesquite.

"Left a lookout on top of the hills!" snapped Lanky. "Damn that bum!"

"If that's so," said Red, wearily, "they'll either scatter for good, or come together soon an' plant an ambush for us. They're only eight to three," he added, sarcastically. "Ain't you goin' to let that there coffee boil, Kid?"

"Coffee be damned!" snapped Lanky. "Can't you think of nothin' else but coffee? You've done yore best to ruin it for thirty years; give the Kid a chance to spoil some. It ought 'a' be put in cold water an' let——"

"An' stand up for somebody to shoot it through the scalp!" interrupted Red, showing more animation. "I'm tellin' you we got to be careful where we sleep to-night, an' how we ride to-morrow." He thoughtfully

rubbed his aching calves while he gloomily eyed his tired feet. "I'd just as soon go to hell as to be an infantryman," he offered.

Mesquite slipped two thick strips of bacon and a flapjack on a tin plate and passed it to the aching scout, whereupon Red was satisfied to play the part of listener for a while.

"If they split, we got to split; an' each of us pick his own trail," said the cook, secretly pleased by this necessity. He knew the trail he would pick to follow. It would be the first that left the composite track.

This, according to his guess, would be the one made by Shanghai, the fox, who thought so much of his skin. He wanted Shanghai. He wanted him so badly that he fairly ached.

Red took advantage of a necessary wait in the offering of flapjacks, Lanky having grabbed the second from the skillet, to stake out a claim for himself. He wanted Shanghai as much as Mesquite wanted him, and he believed that the old fox would not be the first one to leave the crowd, for the first diverging trail would stand out with a definiteness which would be lacking in the others. Shanghai would not be the first one to tempt pursuit.

"I'm agreein' on the split," said Red, endeavouring to mask the cupidity contained in his next remark. "I'll foller along the main track an' give you fellers first chance at the single ones." This, he felt, sounded like a handsome offer.

Mesquite took the third flapjack and speared his sputtering bacon, trying not to show his satisfaction.

"Well, then," he said, between mouthfuls, to forestall the silent but thoughtful Lanky, "I'll take up the first side trail, though one's about as good as the other."

Lanky reached for the coffee-pot, not daring to look at his bosom friends. He filled his tin cup and blew on the steaming beverage. He believed that Shanghai would let all the others turn aside before he did, figuring that with only three men in pursuit and with seven trails to tempt them, the last would be the safest.

"Take any you wants," he told his companions, generously. "This here coffee has got too much coffee flavour to suit Red, Kid; he won't be able to taste that nice shoe-leather an' oak-bark flavour that he likes so much; but you should 'a' let it go on cold, an' slowly come to——"

"*Nothin'*," interjected Red. He held out his cup. "Put some of that there nursery slush in this here cup, Kid; I'll drink it if it kills me."

Flapjack followed flapjack, well greased with bacon, and despite the disgust of two of the coffee drinkers, the pot was drained. It was good coffee, but neither would admit it, except partly and in order to disparage the favourite method of the other. As twilight deepened among the scattered pines they let the fire go out, and with the coming of dusk each took his blanket and saddle and sought a spot less prominent than the little open glade where they had eaten. The chosen sleeping quarters was the edge of a little clearing in the heart of an extensive growth of brush, where there were many dead and dried stems and branches. Their saddles dumped down and the blankets dropped on top of them,

the three went back and brought up the horses, picketing them in the middle of the little clearing. To ears attuned to warning sounds there are few noises more eloquent than those of breaking twigs; and, in such a situation, no noise harder to avoid making.

On the other side of the gap Shanghai and his seven, reluctantly quitting their elaborate ambush as twilight threatened, made their way to the chosen camp site, posted guards, and obtained the rest so much needed. Reputation magnifies prowess; any three men in that part of the country, not belonging to the Double-Y, would have found the fleeing eight upon them like an avalanche; but of these three and their companions on the ranch many tales were abroad, and neither Shanghai nor any of his crew cared to come to grips with this particular trio.

Five miles lay between the two camps, one guarded by alert human agents; the other, by natural means; and in both camps sleep was profound and undisturbed. In each a course of action had been determined upon; in the one, separate flight; in the other, separate pursuit; in the former canny generalship had mapped out a delayed ambush, to be sprung when suspicion had been lulled. This persistent and vengeful pursuit was rapidly destroying morale. Each time they had thought themselves to be safe a thunderbolt had fallen. They were eight to three, and they had the knowledge that, other things being equal, the follower of a trail in a country rich in cover is at the mercy of the man he follows. The pursued has only to choose his spot and wait, or at most, to double back on his trail, and get

his shot. Known to the pursued, this also was known to the pursuers; and after the latter had broken their camp, scouted warily through the gap on the next morning, and come to the place where the fugitive trail split, they checked their horses and pondered.

Mesquite's gaze roved over the crests of the encircling low mountains. They were hunting in the country of the enemy, entirely ignorant of it; but they were not lacking in knowledge of human nature, and particularly the natures of the men they trailed. Four gaps cut down from the sky-line, indicating as many natural ways of exit from the mountain park.

"We've got to repeat," said Mesquite. "Got to separate, an' watch the gaps; an' we got to get to 'em first. Smoke signals tell them near as much as they tell us; anyhow, they locate us for 'em. We'll split ag'in, each man for himself; an' each man'll stay for himself. If they come together, they'll bring us together; if they don't, we'll get 'em one by one. Take yore choice of the passes. Better make a smoke at the first you come to an' then go on to the next, where you won't make no smoke. That might fool 'em into choosing the wrong pass."

"Mebby they ain't aimin' to leave this park," said Red, reflectively.

"We'll find that out after we watch the passes," replied Lanky.

"If Hoppy was here he'd stick to the trails, come hell or high water," growled Red. "Wish he was."

"I'd be satisfied if I knowed he was well enough to be here," replied Mesquite. He urged his horse into a

walk. "Good luck. We'll mebby meet ag'in before long."

"Good luck," replied Lanky, watching the youth ride from sight into a draw. The tentative expression of affection which came to his countenance was swiftly ironed out, and he turned a poker face to his companion.

"That kid's made a fool outa us, so far; if we don't get a rustle on, he'll keep on makin' fools outa us. Hoppy warn't much better at his age."

"You talk like a fool," growled Red, kneeing his horse. "So-long; an' don't get shot ag'in."

Lanky's farewells were growled, and he struck out toward the right-hand gap, where a panel of palpitant blue cut down into the blurred greenery of the mountains. He had no eye for beauty, it having been so close around him all his years that he could not see it, but looked over and beyond it. The purpling mists along the bases of mountain and hill, slowly fading as the sun climbed higher; the varying shades of green rioting in the park itself, and the magic of the early slanting light on the distant mountain sides meant nothing to him. He took the cool crispness and the beautiful greens of the mountains as carelessly as he had taken the wonderful and delicate pastels of the deserts. Had any one told Lanky that there was nothing on all the earth so hauntingly beautiful as a desert, he would have thought them utterly and hopelessly crazy.

Mesquite, reaching the other end of the brush-filled draw, had pulled up until he was satisfied that his companions had gone on their respective ways. Then he circled toward the south, swinging back at the end of

a two-mile radius, and soon left his horse to proceed on foot. He found, as he knew he would, a double trail; two of the pursued had already come together, and minute observations led him to believe that these two riders had been in no hurry. Returning to his horse he mounted and rode parallel to the trail, and some hundred yards from it, often returning to it to be sure he was not losing it; and often glancing at a patch of aspen standing a-shiver on the top of the nearest high hill. There came a movement part way up this hill, where a thrusting ledge of sandstone broke the smooth and carpet-like continuity of the brush; and instantly he threw himself from the saddle, led his horse into a deep wash, hobbled it, and slipped on foot into the friendly and sheltering brush.

At the foot of this hill Shanghai and Bill Hoskins had dismounted and picketed their horses in a clump of trees. They were supposed to lay a plain trail, to double back to their friends and to take part in the action which the persistence of the Double-Y punchers assured them would take place. The ambush was set, but the six men who made it did not know that they had been deserted by their two companions who, instead of laying a trail into the deadly trap, were leaving the waiting six. Without knowing it, the six really were playing the part of a rear guard while Shanghai and Bill Hoskins got away.

Hoskins took his rifle from the saddle scabbard and turned toward the hill, searching for a way which would lead him through unbroken cover.

"What'll we say when they ask us why we didn't lay

that trail an' come back to 'em?" he demanded, future possibilities disturbing him.

"We got plenty of time to figger that out," answered Shanghai. "We can say that we rode farther than we thought." He looked around with a furtive air, assumed for the benefit of his companion. "Before I goes up on that hill I'm figgerin' to take a little scout around. I'll meet ye on top, south of the aspen thicket. Won't be long, neither."

Hoskins, a traitor to his friends, regarded the old fox with level gaze, in which were suspicion and a veiled hostility. He, himself, was not worthy of trust, and he had no illusions about his companion.

"You better see that you ain't very long," he said, slowly. "You try any of yore fancy tricks on me an' I'll peg yore old hide out to dry." He seemed eager and restless, anxious to get up to the little aspen grove, from where he could see what took place at the ambush back along their trail.

"You knows I wouldn't do nothin' like that ter ye, Bill," said Shanghai, earnestly. "With them damned bloodhounds follerin' so clost behind we dassn't git careless. Why, one of 'em might be on our trail, right now, if they missed the ambush. They split up yestiddy an' struck straight acrost, didn't they?"

Hoskins watched the old reprobate coil the picket rope and fasten it to the saddle, mount, and ride southward into the brush along the sloping side of a ravine; and then he turned and swiftly, although carefully, made his way up the broken hillside, hotly eager to

gain the shelter of the quivering aspens on the top of the lofty lookout.

Mesquite caught sight of the bobbing movements through a thinned place in the brush screen, and risked a quick glance over the hillside to find another way up it. Satisfied that he had found what he wanted, he slipped cautiously through the brush, working to the right in a direction opposite to the course taken by Shanghai; but this, as yet, he did not know. He exulted as he climbed upward, for where he had only expected to track down one man, he was tracking down two; and he had no doubts about the ultimate outcome. As he thought of Lanky and Red watching the passes from this mountain park he smiled; not that he did not believe they were doing the right thing, but because he had overtaken his quarry so much sooner than he had had any right to expect. With the passes watched, they could spare one man to hunt through the park itself, and, perhaps, frighten the game within reach of the other two. If Red did not like Mesquite's change of plan he had no one to blame but himself: had not Red, somewhat sneeringly, said that Hopalong would have followed a hot trail and let the passes go?

Nearing the top of the hill Mesquite slowed and put most of his effort into moving cautiously. He could hear the aspens whispering when he finally abandoned hands and knees as a mode of locomotion, and dropped to his stomach, to wriggle patiently through the grass and around the scattered clumps of brush. Soon he caught the odour of strong tobacco and he swiftly

raised his head to fix the direction of the gentle wind. The tops of the grass bent a little toward him from the front, and he circled again to the right, to come upon the suspicious locality from one side. This course took him to the rim on the west side of the hilltop, where a bare ledge of shale and soft stone arose like a broken rampart. Below him a series of barren benches fell away to the edge of a thin forest in the valley, two great wedge-shaped streaks of detritus cutting far into it, several dead trees thrusting up through it.

An impatient rustling of slender twigs tore his gaze from the trees below and sent him squirming around to face the sounds; and as he did so there came the sharp scream of a bullet so close to his head that he ducked, while below him sounded the flat, whip-like report of a heavy rifle. This bullet, fifty yards farther on in its course, passed well over the head of Bill Hoskins, and aroused in him a startled and lively curiosity. Not knowing that an enemy was so close to him, and believing that he was alone on the hilltop, it was only natural that Bill should think that the leaden missile had been intended for him. He whirled around, going into a crouch. Hesitating for a moment while he oriented the report, he started toward the edge of the hilltop to see if he could get sight of the hopeful marksman. Shanghai might have reached that point in back, but he was almost certain that none of his pursuers would have had time to get there. Still, Shanghai would gain nothing by his death. It was very puzzling.

Hoskins parted the brush and found himself staring blankly into the muzzle of a Colt, held in the hand of

the man who had caused them all so much trouble.

At the snapped command to surrender he raised his hands swiftly, the rifle falling from them, and as they stopped above his head he writhed sideways and plunged, shoulder first, against his would-be captor. As he plunged, he brought his hands down with all his strength and knocked the roaring weapon from the hand that held it.

Tricked by such a display of desperate courage in a man supposed to be a stranger to it, and momentarily upset by the smashing impact of the driving shoulder, Mesquite staggered back, his other hand instinctively darting toward the left-hand holster; as he drew the gun from it his heel caught on a root and threw him, the weapon jerking from his grasp. He saw, in a blurr, Bill Hoskins reach for his own Colt, and made a desperate attempt to spring upon the gun hand before it had time to pull the trigger. He was going through the air when another sharp scream went past his head, and when he struck Hoskins he was surprised by the ease with which the heavier man went down. Mesquite, hugging his enemy as tightly as he could with one arm, searched desperately with his free hand for Hoskins's gun hand; and then, finding it, and finding it strangely inert, he closed his grip on it and pushed back a little to gain room for a full arm swing. As he released his grip Hoskins dropped, and what Mesquite saw made him leap from the prostrate figure and crouch swiftly to avoid another possible shot from the deadly marksman down among the trees.

Wriggling swiftly through the grass, Mesquite found

his rifle and crept cautiously toward a heavy clump of brush on the very edge of the natural rampart. Carefully parting the cover he peered through it and looked down upon the tops of miles of trees. Patient as an Indian he waited there while the minutes dragged slowly past, searching systematically for a glimpse of the hidden rifleman; and then, on a partly bare ridge, far back in the green sea of branches and leaves, he caught, out of the corner of his eye, a barely perceptible movement, and focussed quickly upon it. He was too late to determine what it was, but a faint line of dust rising from the ridge answered his queries: The second man, somehow sensing his deadly mistake, had gotten away, but had he? Only time would tell.

## CHAPTER XIV

### ON THE TRAIL OF A FOX

MESQUITE sat on his horse on the top of a little divide in the mountain park, watching two thin columns of smoke climbing heavenward against the fresh greenery of the distant mountains. His friends were carrying out his ideas, and with their smoke columns marked the entrances to two passes from the park-like valley. In all there were four of these natural exits which could be easily seen; how many more ways out of the valley there were he did not know. Red Connors and Lanky Smith by their fires had marked the two passes they would not stay and guard, for they would ride on and hide themselves at the entrances of the other two, putting their trust in smoke.

Mesquite turned from contemplation of the smoke columns, wheeled his horse, and pushed westward to find the tracks of Shanghai and to stick to them to a show-down. He located them easily, read that the fugitive was pressing his horse and for the while depending on speed; and, risking a shot from ambush, the deputy followed hotly, at times circling around clumps of brush and other cover which might contain a marksman. All that day he followed, studying not so much the tracks before his eyes as the general lay of the coun-

try; and every point was referred by him to the location of Split Top Mountain, which he believed to be the principal point of rendezvous. When twilight deepened and made him reluctantly cease his trailing, he found a deep ravine where the light of his fire would not show, cooked a hurried supper, put out the fire, and rode a mile farther through the darkness before he was satisfied to picket the horse and roll up in his blankets. Dawn found him stamping out the breakfast fire, and the first rays of the sun warmed his back as he rode once more along the trail he was following.

The forest growth grew steadily sparser, and the country was becoming more and more broken by steep, low hills. He noticed that the trail was bearing steadily toward the south, gradually describing a circle; and more than that, it was taking on a peculiar characteristic. It led him time after time along the end of a ridge to swing sharply up the farther side until within a few yards of the summit; here it ran level for varying distances, then went down again, across the flats, and repeated the whole thing at the next ridge or hill. The tracks still indicated that the maker was pushing rapidly on, except where they led under the tops of the sheltering ridges; and there the fugitive had slowed, and in some places had stopped altogether.

Mesquite grinned, and then laughed aloud at the significance of this. He was not old in years, but he was richly endowed with the lore of the plainsman, thanks to the teachings of his father and to his own love for the study. He could picture the fugitive, doubling back to his friends, or to some agreed-upon rendezvous,

working out this phase of his trail; he could see the old fox streaking across the low-lying level stretches toward the upper end of the next ridge or hill, around this, up the farther slope, and slowing as he neared the top. He could picture Shanghai riding hatless under the summit, now and then standing up in his stirrups to peer over it for a glimpse of his back trail; and occasionally checking his horse for a more careful study of the country he had just passed over. The fox was getting ready to play the rôle of a more combative animal, to strike unexpectedly against the persistent follower. Mesquite enjoyed this phase of the game and rode on at the same steady lope; but he was careful to estimate distance in the terms of rifle-range, and not to pass or approach the ridges too closely.

Imagination is a great gift, bestowing riches on its owner. With nothing to think about except that little matter of distance and the plain tracks before him, Mesquite began to put himself in the place of the fugitive. The constant repetition of this common trail trick was calculated to put a man's mind in one groove, to centre thought on the menace of the trick itself, and to make a pursuer careless, in time, of other things. It plainly indicated one danger and tended to discount caution in other dangers. Mesquite, enjoying his rôle as pursuer, found more enjoyment in assuming the rôle of the pursued, and cast about in his mind for ways to baffle pursuit or to render it deadly. Suddenly he was struck by a thought that made him pull up involuntarily, scan the comparatively level plain between two ridges, and freeze from the intensity of his thoughts.

For several moments he sat rigid in his saddle and then, with a profane ejaculation, turned abruptly from the innocent-looking trail to ride at right angles to it, along the front of the next ridge. He had remembered, and given full force and credit to, certain signs which had made him smile when he had looked upon them; several places, high up under the summit of a ridge, Shanghai had left his horse, crept on hands and knees to the top, and lay barely under the apex; the sign of his rifle plain in the dust.

Why had this commonplace action of a cautious and hunted man made Mesquite react to it so strangely? It was only the sign of a hunted fugitive looking back along his trail in hope of a shot at his pursuer; but to an imaginative mind it was more than that. In the first place, there was no real need for it; a tenderfoot, or a man pursued for the first time, might be urged to do it from sheer over-caution or from timidity arising out of his own inexperience; but this was not Shanghai's first flight, and neither was he inexperienced. He had not been a tenderfoot for forty years, and it was doubtful that he ever had been. He had fled at speed, which his trail plainly showed; he had made no attempt to mask it, to double and turn, to seek out hard ground or to follow running water; there the line of tracks lay, plain to the most amateurish eyes; and yet, he had wasted time in slow riding behind the ridge tops and in leaving his horse in order to climb the steep slopes on foot. At the first of these significant signs Mesquite had found two cigarette butts, indicating that some time had been spent there by the man who was showing

a trail which otherwise indicated almost a panicky flight. Furthermore, Shanghai's reputation was that of a man who never stood and fought while he could escape. The coming of night had permitted him to ride on and put additional miles between him and his pursuer, who had to stop and wait for daylight to show the trail again; and he had ridden on for several hours before dismounting and picketing his horse to graze in a rich patch of bunchgrass.

Mesquite laughed aloud again, and there came to him some of that grudged admiration which Hopalong and the others felt for the old fox. At the thought of that word "old" Mesquite's eyes danced: the old fox knew that he was being followed by a mere youth, and in most cases youth is synonymous with ignorance and recklessness. Plainly marking out a class of danger spots, and emphasizing them by the dumb show of lying in wait, Shanghai was preparing the mind of his pursuer to discount the real danger, the hidden danger of the innocent flats between the hills, where an occasional dry-wash cut across like a well-designed rifle trench, and afforded excellent cover for a marksman. Having by this time roughly estimated the trend of the fugitive's trail, and bearing in mind the position of Split Top Mountain, Mesquite left the trail and struck due south on a course calculated to make a chord across the arc of Shanghai's riding. While he still remembered to keep a long rifle range away from the ridges, boulders, and other possible cover, he pushed his horse at speed, safe for the while, since any ambush would be sprung along the actual trail. For a little

while this would be true; after that he would have to use more caution, in case the pursued had marked his change of direction, and attempted to make use of it. To out-guess a fox is an achievement in which even another fox may take a pardonable pride.

Noon came and passed, and the miles behind Mesquite had assumed a sizable total. Knowing approximately how many hours the fugitive had been ahead of him when he had left the trail, Mesquite felt that he was nearly even with the other; but to strengthen his assurance, he pressed on until mid-afternoon, and then struck straight toward the west to relocate the tracks or, failing in this, to learn that he was ahead of the maker of them. He followed his new course until nightfall without sight of anything which told of Shanghai's passing, and he built his supper fire in the sharp bend of a deep dry-wash, whose perpendicular banks at this point, harder in structure than those above or below, made a miniature canyon which would shut out all reflection of the little fire, and the overhang of the shale wall masked it from above. Again he kicked apart the embers and rode on until darkness assured him that he was safe from tracking, and then he hobbled his horse and turned it loose to graze over a wide area of sparse but nutritious grass. Sunrise found him in the saddle again and riding on; but it also found him tricked, although he did not know it.

Shanghai's reputation was truly founded. He was a fox and not a wolf. The persistence of his pursuer indicated the character of that person sufficiently well

to give the fugitive a basis for appraising him; and Mesquite's youth suggested adolescent carelessness. To be certain of the latter and more fully to measure Mesquite's capacity for thinking, Shanghai had laid his trail from ridge to ridge, and made those signs which the deputy had found so enlightening. Time after time the fugitive, from the vantage point of another ridge, had looked back to see the pursuer sticking stubbornly to his trail; and he almost had given up the hope that his new plan would work, when his efforts were rewarded. At last his threats of ambush had been taken for their face value; at last Mesquite had heeded them and used his head as an old hand at trailing would have used it. The steady swing of the trail around a great circle and the location of the fugitive's friends united to indicate that its maker was trying to rejoin the party; the high and screened watch points on every hill and ridge had conveyed their empty warnings; and reading the signs aright, according to the data presented, the deputy had drawn the natural conclusions; but the conclusions were wrong because the signs had been made to deceive. Shanghai was not trying to create carelessness which would discount the possibility of danger in innocently appearing surroundings; he was not trying to work back to his friends through such a wide circle; but he was trying to create the suspicion of danger, and the natural inference to be drawn from the direction of his flight. In no other way could he throw the pursuer off his trail long enough for him to put a great distance between them.

Watching from another ridge, Shanghai caught sight

of the moving speck which he knew was Mesquite Jenkins; and he chuckled with delight when he saw his pursuer at last forsake the trail and its threat, and strike straight across country to intersect the great circle at a point many miles away. This, he recognized, was no accidental choice; and this, he also recognized, proved that the youth was an expert trailer, despite his years. Only the amateurs stuck stubbornly to the tracks themselves; the adept, drawing conclusions based on experience, would dare to leave the actual sign and save time and danger by striking across the windings to pick it up again miles farther on. In no other way could a pursuer hope to overtake a fugitive, for the latter could make the signs much faster than a follower could find and read them. Knowing the calibre of the pursuer, Shanghai knew what to expect in a given circumstance. The swordsman fears an expert less than he does a novice, for no one may hope to guess what asinine thing a novice or a fool will attempt. His doubts cleared up as to the skill of the tracker, Shanghai put back the cigarette paper with which he was about to manufacture more misleading evidence, and with great satisfaction loaded his old pipe for a really satisfying smoke. He lay at ease behind the rim of the ridge, pleasantly watching the speck move straight southward, and from time to time he chuckled as he saw the speck detour to avoid a dry-wash or some other break in the floorlike level of the plain. He was in no great hurry now, for now he had time in which to get away; but it would not do to waste too much of it. He gave Mesquite full credit for his skill, and idly

wondered how it was that a man of so few years could have become so expert in an art so difficult; and he wondered how soon that expertness would learn of the trick, and how it would react to the knowledge.

The old man put himself in the youth's place, and found that there were two things to choose between when that knowledge came. He either would ride back on his own trail, at the consequent cost of much time lost, or he would strike north and west in hope of finding the trail of the fugitive farther along, in which case the time lost would not amount to so much. Undecided in this, Shanghai slid down the slope a few yards, arose, mounted and rode north, thereby making his trail describe a sharp and narrow angle and one that could not be picked up in case Mesquite chose a northwest course. Of course, later, Mesquite would realize that he had been tricked and start a circle of his own, but by that time it would be too late. Shanghai reluctantly admitted that this youth was forcing him to draw heavily on his years of experience; that he had to plan hours ahead and overlook no possibility. Night found him the gainer by a full day's ride, and he camped early to permit his horse to make up for some of the poor grazing it had had. In such country the grass did not grow thickly, and the radius of the picket rope would not compensate for the energy used up during the day. A very large part of the grazing time was spent in moving about in search of grass, and even a hobbled animal, able to cover more ground than one circumscribed by a picket rope, might feed inadequately. On this part of the mountain park the earth was semi-

desert, and while the grass was famous for its nutriment it was very sparse.

Mesquite, bearing in mind the general trend of the trail-circle, had passed the point where he had expected to cut it again; and suspicion grew swiftly. Would Shanghai voluntarily return to his friends now that he had managed to get away from the storm centre of danger? Convinced that he was wasting time on a fool's chase, he had one of three alternatives: to abandon the trail as now lost and of small value because of the time wasted; to follow his own tracks back to where he had turned aside, which would result in more lost time; or to gamble in an attempt to pick up the signs to the northward. In this case it did not so much matter if he abandoned the trail, for the reason that he could ride back and pursue others of the band, and obtain a prisoner or a victim from the rest of the crowd; and if he stuck to this present pursuit he might not only fail in it, but be unable later on to overtake any of the others. The cleverness of Shanghai's stratagem struck him with sudden force and sent a little wave of cold anger through him; he could imagine the old fox cackling in derision; and he swung his horse toward the northwest, determined to renew the chase. If he failed in it he might force the fugitive into the range of Red's or Lanky's riding.

All day he rode, stopping only when he came to massed grass so that his mount could, in half an hour, obtain an amount of food which would require three times as long to pick up under ordinary conditions. Darkness found him moving with no thought of camping,

and he pushed on until after dawn without stopping except to rest his horse. He was certain that he had not yet reached a locality where he might expect to find the trail. Coming to another patch of heavy grass in a damp depression of the plain, he picketed the horse and soon cooked himself a breakfast over stems of sage and small brush, and then went on again. At noon he climbed a steep, high ridge and scanned the country on three sides of him, and was turning away in disappointment when an infinitesimal moving speck caught his eye. It was a bird hastily climbing almost straight up in the air. Such a flight bespoke fright, and Mesquite, hoping anew, ran and stumbled down the ridge, vaulted into the saddle, and struck out on a lope straight for the scene of the hawk's possible discomfiture.

Shanghai, riding down the smooth floor of a deep dry-wash, the sounds of his horse's hoofs lost in the fine soft sand, turned a sharp bend and blundered upon a hawk feeding on a jack rabbit. The bird, enraged by this sudden intrusion, showed signs of fight for an instant, and then, leaving its prey, launched itself into the air as straight up as it could, frantically trying to escape the threat of Shanghai's drawn gun glinting in the sunlight.

Shanghai regretfully holstered the weapon, his trigger finger withheld by a subconscious dislike for the noise of the report. There was no telling who might be within hearing of a gunshot, and now that he was almost safe it would be folly to make a mistake. His face crinkled with anger at the bird's momentary show

of fight, and he cursed it malignantly as it climbed out of range. His anger over so small a thing was remarkably savage, as though he recognized in the bird's pugnacity a knowledge and acceptance of his own reputation for timidity, a reputation which did him an injustice. He shook a fist heavenward at a soaring speck, and then grinned maliciously.

"Jest for that you lose yore grub!" he snarled, and dismounted. When he rode on again he had the rabbit fastened to his saddle, and found a little satisfaction in his revenge.

Mesquite, pushing his horse as hard as he dared, staked its usefulness on this gambler's choice. Had the hawk been surprised by a coyote it would not have launched itself into such a panicky flight; it would have flown aside, just out of reach, not willing wholly to abandon its prey to a petty, four-footed coward; and while he debated this matter he turned the end of a ridge and drew rein on the bank of a dry-wash, along the bottom of which lay the very familiar tracks of a horse. Laughing quietly, he sought for and found a way down to the bottom, and pushed on with renewed eagerness. He had no ambush to fear now, for the man he was crowding so closely had no suspicion of his danger.

## CHAPTER XV

### A SWITCHED DECK

SHANGHAI followed up the dry-wash until it gradually became effaced on the upper part of the little watershed; he crossed the ridge and rode straight down the slope toward another infant wash, along this until its walls reached above his head, and then turned up a branch wash toward the south, crossed another dividing ridge, and drew rein as he came to the tracks of a horse, which he studied closely. Nodding suddenly, he followed the tracks toward and into a wide hollow well covered with brush and stunted trees, and laughed at the startled exclamation of the man who had been bending over a small fire.

"Hello, Arizony," said Shanghai, affably, as he swung down from the saddle and started on foot up a steep place in the bank of the hollow. The habitual caution in this movement did not surprise Arizona, for his companion's habits were well known to him.

"Where the hell did you an' Hoskins go to?" demanded Arizona in obvious anger. Arizona was in no sweet temper, having just been chased for two days by Lanky Smith and only escaping during the night just past. He remembered vividly that Shanghai and Hoskins had been delegated to lay a plain trail to and

through an ambush for the Double-Y punchers to follow, and that the trail had not been laid. The ambushers had waited three times as long as they had had any business to, and then scattered; and Arizona had been unfortunate enough to try to leave the mountain park by one of the passes to the north, where Lanky Smith had been quietly on guard.

Shanghai had been searching the plain from his elevated position and had seen a faint streamer of dust on his back trail, and his mind was racing for a way out of the threatened danger as he made his way down the steep bank.

"We started, all right," he explained, glancing at his horse. This animal long had been coveted by his present companion, and was fresher by far than the horse which had led Lanky so swift and long a chase. Arizona's mount was almost a wreck from hard running and insufficient food. "Them damn punchers blundered on to our trail, cut us off from the way we was figgerin' to ride, killed Hoskins, an' one of 'em has been chasin' me ever since. Throwed him off yesterday an' made a fool out of him. Now I can take things easy for awhile an' rest my cayuse. That there roan's a wonder: look how fresh it is after all it's done. Where are the boys goin' to meet ag'in?"

It took all Arizona's will power to keep from staring at Shanghai's big roan, and the glances he gave it were full of avarice, which Shanghai recognized without appearing to. Arizona's own horse was well used up, and never had been any too good; and he was not as certain as he might have been that Lanky definitely

had lost his trail; but he was pretty sure that Shanghai's pursuer had been well lost: Shanghai's cunning was assurance as to that. Arizona had no love for Shanghai, and strongly doubted the reason for that person not having gone through with the plan that he, himself, had outlined for the ambushing of the pursuing punchers. He suspected that Shanghai and Hoskins had left their hard-pressed friends as a bait to check pursuit and to clear a way for themselves; and he suspected the truth.

"So they killed Hoskins, huh?" he said, scowling to mask any tell-tale sign of the plan forming in his head. "Who was they?" he asked, curiously, hoping to trap the old fox into a lie.

"One of 'em was that Mesquite cub," innocently answered Shanghai, becoming a little nervous at the way time was passing. That little dust streamer in the west was bothering him, for it would be growing rapidly plainer. He flashed another glance at his companion's horse, and it required no second sight to tell him why the animal had been run so hard. One of the persistent three had been keeping Arizona on the jump; and Shanghai had no way of knowing the identity of this pursuer. However, Arizona's ease of mind was plainly revealed by the placidity of his actions and demeanour: he undoubtedly had thrown the pursuer off his trail and now felt safe again. This was much more than Shanghai had done, despite his words.

"Why, I didn't get sight of the other feller," he said. "Might 'a' been Connors or it might 'a' been Smith." He chuckled softly. "Well, it's a good thing we both

can rest up a little. That cayuse of yourn looks like hell, an' a good rest an' feedin' won't hurt it none. It never was much good, though."

Arizona grunted something and tried to hide his determination. His plan had been completed. With a comparatively fresh horse, and almost any animal would have been comparatively fresh in contrast with his own, and with Lanky Smith somewhere to the north and circling like a damned hound in search of the trail he had lost, Arizona's peace of mind would be greatly improved by leaving Shanghai a worn-out animal and this pleasant little campfire. He arose awkwardly, lost his balance for a moment, and managed to knock over the coffee-pot while he struggled to regain his equilibrium.

"—— —— my clumsy feet!" he growled, kicking at the pot and missing it in his simulated rage. "If you want any coffee, fill that damn thing an' get back here *pronto!*"

"Shouldn't lose yore temper over a little thing like that," said Shanghai, pleasantly, and in no way showing that he saw through his companion's strategy. His ostensible confidence in the other's fairness was child-like, and one could see that he was thinking only of the coffee. He picked up the pot and started for the hillside fault, where water percolated through a stratum of rotten stone and collected in a little pool on a ledge before trickling down the rocks to be blotted out by the sand at their base. The spring advertised its location by the vivid greenery about it and the old fox needed no directions for its finding. Reaching the timid spring

he bent over to fill the pot without disturbing the sediment of the little pool, and then glanced swiftly back toward the camp in time to see Arizona, lying on the far side of the big roan, dash from sight into the brush and stunted timber. Smothering a chuckle, Shanghai threw the pot from him and ran at top speed toward the remaining animal, flung himself into the saddle, rode swiftly up the little divide, and grinned at the tenuous dust moving swiftly nearer along the trail he had made. Wheeling, he pushed the horse over a long stretch of rocky ground, exultantly glad that it was unshod, and in a few minutes he had lost himself from the sight of any one who might ride over the top of the ridge.

Using every trick he knew, he bent all his energies to masking his trail, and in this he was helped by the nature of the ground. When a mile from the camp he left his picketed mount and circled back to his trail on foot and crouched behind a boulder, his rifle in his hands. He was glad that Arizona had taken time to change the rifles in the saddle scabbards before he had swapped horses, for the calibres and makes were different, and it would have been serious to be short of rifle ammunition. While he waited behind the boulder to stop a pursuit which he felt was more than unlikely, he wondered how it was that Mesquite had been able to find his trail and to make up so much of the lost time; and then he gently laid the rifle down, folded his skinny arms across his lean stomach, and rocked to and fro in convulsive and silent mirth. An amateur tracker would not know one set of horse tracks from another;

but the trail hound who had followed and outguessed him was not an amateur, and could be counted on to make such nice discriminations.

"Damned if it ain't worth losin' the roan," he chuckled when the peak of his mirth had passed. "Arizony shore swallowed the hull thing plumb entire. Swapped his wore-out cayuse for a good cayuse: but he don't know for what else! He's plumb welcome to the roan, an' what goes with it; an' I'm aimin' to get out of this country just as fast as this crow-bait will take me. Give it a day to rest up an' feed, an' it'll near be a good cayuse. Whoever was chasin' Arizona ain't botherin' me very much: I'd rather have Smith or Connors after me any day than *that* cold-faced trail-hound!"

Mesquite rode cautiously up the far slope of the little divide, scrutinized the peaceful scene below him and considered the gently burning fire. The tracks he had been following so long ran down the slope, lost themselves on rocky ground, and reappeared in the sand and gravel near the fire. Other tracks showed there, and from that distance he confused them. This looked entirely too peaceable to suit him, this little hollow with its brush and small timber; and the burning fire fairly shrieked a warning. Realizing that he was in rifle range of the camp site, he backed swiftly down the far slope and rode south along the ridge; and to his surprise he saw the tracks of a horse across a sandy opening in the brush. They went on in a line as straight as the nature of the ground would permit, and a nearer approach to them told him that they had been made by a hard-running horse. He crossed the ridge when he

thought that such a move was safe, and rode up to the tracks. He swore aloud with exultation: Shanghai was not as far ahead now as he had been earlier in the day, and somehow the old fox had learned that the pursuit had again become hard and close.

Mesquite did not hesitate. The opportunity offered by the fire and camp site to acquire a useless knowledge, and perhaps to trail another of the band and one who could be safely counted on to give him far less trouble than the man he had followed for so many miles, did not tempt him: He wanted Shanghai, and now it looked as though his want would be satisfied.

He followed the trail doggedly, here and there cutting across the windings when he could see the tracks at the other end; and soon he realized that the fleeing man was reducing the speed of his riding, as though somewhat assured that pursuit had slackened. This gave him food for thought, and it slowed him a little and made him more alert. He began to waste time now, in reverting to a former method of procedure, for he rode around all suspicious-looking covers. He had had a taste of Shanghai's marksmanship a few days before, and could find no fault with it. Twilight found him still pursuing his tactics of caution, and darkness made him give up his trailing for the day. He picketed his horse and made a camp, but before he set fire to the little pile of dry twigs and small branches for the cooking of his supper he scouted around in the brush and up to the top of a small hill close by.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked again. A soft glow, so faint as to make him doubt his vision, was discernible

far to the south. Shanghai would not do a thing like that; and yet, his slowing pace had suggested that Shanghai once more felt secure from pursuit, but that might be explained by the fatigue of his horse. Baffled in finding a positive explanation for that careless fire, Mesquite became suspicious of it. He hastened back to his own camp, forsook it, and rode on a round-about course well to the left and beyond it. He did not purpose to be surprised in the night or wake up at dawn to find his horse missing and himself afoot in the wilderness. At last assured that he dared to leave the animal without fear of its theft, he picketed it again and made his way on foot toward the tell-tale glow, his senses alert, and ready for anything.

By the time this suspicious fire had died down to a degree which masked the glow he was not far from it, and he went forward unerringly. After a cautious reconnaissance which would have reflected credit to an old-time Indian, he came to the gully he had been searching for. One bank, the farther, was high and steep, of that characteristic light gray colour of the clays of that country. On the almost flat bank across from it a few glowing embers pulsed into incandescence under the urging of a faint and fitful breeze; and near the dying fire a blanket-rolled figure lay immobile, barely to be seen in the increasing darkness around the incandescent ashes. The bulky object at the end farthest from the embers had the general outlines of a saddle, and the inference to be drawn was plain enough.

Mesquite froze against his boulder, crouching even

lower. The inference was entirely too plain; and to his mind there came keen recollection of dummy figures which he, himself, had manufactured to place around a campfire not a week before. A hunted fool might sleep beside his cooking fire; but by no stretch of imagination could he picture old Shanghai doing this, after leaving a plain and easily followed trail for half a day.

Silently moving back the way he had come, Mesquite listened for one tell-tale sound, the sound which would indicate if this was a true night camp. If it was, then the horse would be picketed somewhere near it; and no horse grazes without making a characteristic cropping noise as it cuts off the grass. Waiting with a patience foreign to most white men, Mesquite let the minutes pass without stirring, his ears straining to catch sounds of life. An hour passed without hearing a thing that told him anything, and in that silence the grazing of a horse would have been heard for many feet. This camp was a blind, the figure was a dummy, and somewhere the fugitive was sleeping peacefully; or he was waiting within a few yards of that dying fire to shoot the man who might investigate it. If he was sleeping somewhere else why had he taken the trouble to roll up a dummy figure and leave it there? In such a case a bait were useless; and in this altitude a man did not part with his blankets to make up a dummy for the fun of it.

It has been said that patience is a virtue; but on the plains it was a necessity as well. The maker of that camp had it in measure, but not in full measure. Dawn was near when he crept from his place of concealment,

satisfied that Shanghai had not followed him, and anxious to make the most of the coming daylight hours for his escape from the valley. He circled the camp for safety's sake, and then made his way toward the dummy and the ashes of the fire, laughing softly at the trick he had played on the old fox. Considering the pace he had set the day before, and the condition of the animal he had left for Shanghai to use, he need have no further fear of that person. He would cook his breakfast, get his horse and go on again; and by nightfall he should be in a safe locality, far beyond reach of the Double-Y punchers.

It took Arizona only a few minutes to gather dried wood for the fire; and from under the saddle, serving as a pillow for the dummy figure made up by the blanket, he drew forth his scanty rations. Partly filling the coffee-pot from his canteen he made the mixture, placed the pot on the fire and squatted down before it to roll a cigarette. As he reached toward the fire for an ember he froze momentarily in a vast surprise, and for the moment forgot both ember and breakfast. Coming along the wash, not fifty paces from him, was a young man whose progress was unhurried and steady. The first flush of daylight revealed a nickeled badge fastened askew to the tightly buttoned coat, and showed the soft gleam of steel above the holsters jogging with each deliberate step.

Arizona sucked in his breath, doubting his eyes; and for an instant the two men stared at each other in strong disbelief. The badge-wearing newcomer should have been Shanghai; the man squatting at the fire

should have been Shanghai; and since neither was Shanghai, where was that person?

Mesquite smiled coldly and spoke, but he did not check his slow steps. He was greatly puzzled by this amazing change of identity and the miraculous disappearance of the man he had trailed for so many miles; but he easily shelved the puzzle and thankfully accepted what had been given to him. His long chase had not been fruitless, and he would get Shanghai some other day.

"Want you, Arizony," he said, crisply; "in the name of th' law," he added, somewhat apologetically. He never before had arrested a man, and he felt a little self-conscious. It would have been so very much simpler to have left off the explanatory phrase and started shooting.

Arizona was now on his feet, still incredulous, but balanced and slightly crouched. Had this newcomer been Shanghai he would not have been much surprised; had he been Lanky Smith it would have been understandable; but that it was Mesquite Jenkins passed all belief. Cold anger accompanied the only solution possible: Shanghai had tricked him. All right: for that he would kill Shanghai at the first opportunity. Meanwhile the fact of the present situation had to be accepted at face value. He raised a warning hand, the left hand.

"I can hear you from there," he said. "What you want me for?"

"For shootin' Hopalong Cassidy!" snapped Mesquite, still advancing. "Stick 'em up, if you wants;

it'll suit me better if you don't. So far I ain't took no prisoners, an' I ain't hankerin' to begin with you." The deputy now stopped hopefully, his cold eyes gleaming.

"How'n hell did you ever get on my trail?" demanded Arizona, hoping to clear up this matter without a remaining doubt. Besides, any such discussion would serve to kill time and give him a chance to use his wits. His mind was racing, taking in many things at top speed. He saw the two guns hanging from the wide and sagging belts; he thought of the rage of Hopalong Cassidy's friends, and he doubted that he would be given a fair trial if he surrendered. If he went back to Twin River it would be to face a lynching. Of this youngster he had heard disturbing rumours; but rumours often were grossly exaggerated; and now the deputy was not with his two able companions in arms. If he surrendered he would be lynched; if he fought it out here and now while he had something to fight with he might win his freedom. There was great danger in an even break with this cold bloodhound; there was certain death if he gave in to the officer's demand; and if he were lucky he might outwit this youth, who was only half his own age.

"I didn't shoot Cassidy; but I ain't expectin' you to believe it," he said, smiling a little. "Suppose we eat breakfast, an' then talk it over? I reckoned you was Shanghai at first."

"We'll eat breakfast, an' you can talk all you wants," agreed Mesquite; "but you won't need that gun to talk

with, an' you might shoot yoreself with it. Put yore hands up, turn around, an' hold still for a minute."

"If I give you my gun you'll take me back to be lynched for somethin' I never done," retorted Arizona. "I'm figgerin' to keep it."

"Then you ain't very much at figgerin'," countered the deputy. "I'd a whole lot rather you'd use it, but bein' a deppity sheriff I got to tell you to turn it over. Stick up yore hands, an' turn 'round." He began to move forward again, his own hands gently swinging past the butts of his guns.

"But I tell you I didn't shoot Cassidy!" snapped Arizona, stiffening a little, and throwing his weight on the balls of his feet.

"Just the same, I'm takin' you back to Twin River for it," said Mesquite, icy lights beginning to show far back in his eyes. "Either draw, or elevate!"

Arizona leaped sideways, his hand streaking forward and up to end in a burst of powder smoke; the reports sounded almost as one. There were three of them, for Mesquite's first shot had cut through the place where Arizona had stood before he leaped; but the second, fired with his left hand and the other gun, drove the fugitive halfway around and made him drop his weapon before he could fire it again.

Arizona, bent over and his left hand holding his wounded right arm, peered through the thinning smoke at the calm deputy whose left hand held a smoking gun squarely on him. At the deputy's feet lay a second gun, also smoking, and the deputy's right

arm hung down at his side, the numbness of the shock slowly wearing off.

"I'm arrestin' you, like I said," growled the deputy. "Step away from that gun; I'll shoot straighter next time."

Arizona slowly complied and scowled at his captor, who now stooped, picked up the weapon at his feet, and sheathed it. Then he walked over to the fugitive's weapon, picked it up also with his right hand, emptied it, and threw it far into the brush, not a muscle of his face telling of the pain of that effort. Letting his right arm drop again to his side, Mesquite smiled coldly.

"Bandage up yore arm," he said. "Then you can fix up mine. Funny we both was shot in the same place, 'though mine ain't much hurt."

"Funny as hell!" snapped Arizona. He remembered the unhesitating use of the deputy's wounded arm, the force with which he threw away the captured weapon; he remembered that no grimace of pain had accompanied the action, that the expression on the cold face did not change; and he sighed as he took his neckerchief and roughly bound up his wounded arm, working with one good hand and his teeth. Then he shuffled forward toward the waiting deputy, trying to appear cowed and hopeless; but he was nerving himself for one final effort. While he slowly advanced he drew cigarette papers and tobacco sack from his pocket, and he opened the sack by the aid of his teeth. Inwardly he smiled at how he had cursed the dry and dusty tobacco only the day before; now it promised to get him out of a tight place where nothing else would serve.

He would take a gambler's chance, and risk everything on one throw.

"You win, boss," he mumbled, looking down at the ground to hide the gleam in his eyes; but he saw the Colt moving forward to press against his side; and writhing from the contact and getting out of the line of fire, he swiftly moved his good left arm and threw the contents of the sack into Mesquite's eyes and face.

The roar of the Colt was useless, for Arizona was pressing tightly against the squirming man who held it. His good hand was fastened on Mesquite's wrist in a desperate effort to keep the gun pointed away from himself while he sought to tear it from the fingers that gripped it. The whistling breath of pain in his ears was sweet music to him, and he felt the grip on the gun grow weaker. Exerting all his strength, Arizona at last tore the weapon loose and, not having time to turn it and fire, he raised his arm to bring the heavy butt down on the deputy's head, down on the head of a man who could not see; but the lesson of fortitude and grit he had seen only a few moments before had not been taken by him at its full value. As his hand arose for the blow that would free him, Mesquite's wounded arm moved swiftly and there came a muffled roar, smoke spurting sideways from Arizona's body. He crumpled and dropped, and at his side sank the victor, tears streaming from his blinded eyes and slowly washing them clean again.

Time passed agonizingly, and then Mesquite's vision cleared enough to let him see a patchwork scene, blurred and indistinct. He reached for the canteen close

beside him and filled his hands with its water, bathing his burning eyes. . . .

Mesquite, his arm roughly bound up and his eyes inflamed and still stinging, slowly arose and looked down at the crumpled figure near the fire. For a moment he stood thus, cursing the thought of taking prisoners; and then he shook his head and put the savage thought from him.

"Luck, blind luck," he muttered. "How much more have I got to learn?"

## CHAPTER XVI

### A TRAP FOR THE WARY

LANKY SMITH, his head bound up in a shirt sleeve, had reached the point where his anger had lost its edge and had assumed the condition of smouldering rancour. He had followed doggedly on an ordinary trail, only to lose it when the signs had shown him that he was getting close to the pursued. If he read the tracks right they told him that the fugitive's horse was nearly spent, and he had prepared himself for action at any moment; then the tracks had disappeared into thin air and left him circling and cursing in vain. His circles grew wider, taking in a great circumference; but they had proved as barren of results as the smaller ones. Finally he stopped, dismounted, and turned his horse loose to graze and to rest, while the rider dumped the saddle down near a rill of drinkable water and listlessly began to make camp.

Having eaten, he reclined on his back under a group of stunted trees and began to go over in his mind, for the tenth time, the happenings of the last few days; and reached the conclusions that he had reached before. The gang had scattered, each man for himself, and no doubt were fleeing from this part of the country as fast as they dare ride, perhaps to meet again days later and

many miles distant. This part of the Broken Wheel country which they had chosen for their haven had proved to be anything but a haven, thanks to the persistent efforts of the three Double-Y riders; the band had been cut down and demoralized, and no one could guess what it would do now.

Gradually Lanky's thoughts reverted to the country immediately around him, where he had just lost a hot trail. To the north it was of such a nature that tracks would be comparatively hard to mask; to the south the earth was harder, and mottled with great stretches of rock on which horse tracks would not show so plainly. This southern section was cut by many and deep dry-washes, in which a man could ride for miles and not show his head above the steep banks. He looked appraisingly at his horse, one of the best of the Double-Y herd, and he knew that a few hours' rest and feeding would work wonders with it.

On his circling he had ridden across country where tracks would plainly show; but they had not shown, and he believed that he knew the reason for this: the man he was following, knowing this, had chosen the harder and semi-arid southern section, and was steadily widening the gap between them. Therefore, unless he gave up the chase, Lanky should strike south several miles and circle anew, paying particular attention to dry-washes. Having decided to do this, he idly wondered where his friends were. He had left Red Connors far to the north, guarding one of the passes leading from this great mountain valley; he had seen Red's smoke column marking a pass which Red would not watch.

Mesquite Jenkins might be anywhere, but Lanky hazarded a shrewd guess that the youngster was following some trail with the implacable persistence of a hungry wolf. He did not know it, but well to the south of him that same Mesquite was riding swiftly along an alluringly fresh trail.

There was another thing that Lanky did not know. Now more than a few miles east of his present camp old Shanghai, the most cunning of the predatory band, was snugly hidden in a jumbled pile of boulders while his worn-out horse grazed greedily in a hollow close by.

Shanghai chuckled again as he reviewed the events of the past few days. To get rid of Mesquite so easily and to obtain a breathing spell were achievements to be proud of. He would lie here until the following day and then, nursing his second-rate horse, would slowly and cautiously make his way toward and through Jones's Pass, out of the western fringe of the Broken Wheel country, and drift by easy stages to a place of security.

Only one thing bothered Shanghai: the almost certainty that somewhere in his vicinity there was one of the pursuing punchers. He had seen the faint and climbing smoke columns which marked two of the most northern passes, and these indicated that two of the Double-Y men were there; but Shanghai knew differently. The condition of Arizona's horse and the almost panicky eagerness with which Arizona had stolen the roan and raced southward told Shanghai that he had been hard pressed. Therefore one of the smoke columns lied, and it was possible that Arizona's pursuer

was still somewhere in the neighbourhood and looking for sign. While this was somewhat disturbing it was a relief after what Shanghai had gone through, for he would much prefer to have Smith or Connors on his trail than the trail-hound who had pushed him so hard. He would spend the night here and go on in the morning, taking care to be cautious and to mask his trail as best he might.

Dawn came and found three centres of interest in this deadly game of hide and seek. Mesquite's narrow escape was being staged while Lanky saddled up and headed for the southern country, there to circle in hope of picking up the lost trail. Shanghai went without his breakfast, preferring to fast until he had reached a more healthy locality, and started northwestward on foot, leading his rested horse. He had covered less than half-a-dozen miles in this manner when he came to horse tracks cut deep in a patch of soft loam. Tying his horse in a hollow, he followed the tracks on foot, decided that they were part of a circle, and returned to his horse. Would the unknown rider circle again in an attempt to pick up the trail he had lost? This was a matter of great importance, for if he did so, and Shanghai rode on, he would strike the latter's trail. Where time meant safety Shanghai never had been impatient. He picketed his horse in the best cover he could find, and crept northward to locate himself on some height from which he would have a large section of country under his eyes. He knew that if another circle was made it would be outside the one he had found; and so he lost precious time in the necessity for caution.

Lanky Smith rode southward, his gaze mostly on the ground; and he crossed Shanghai's trail of the day before, where it ran over rock, without seeing it. A few hours brought him to the rim of a little hollow, and under his eyes lay the tracks of three horses. His searching glance showed him the cold ashes of a fire, and farther down in the hollow, close by a vivid patch of greenery, he caught sight of a tinny glisten in the sunlight. He studied what he could see of this bright object and decided that it was a coffee-pot, or rather, the common tin bucket known to the careless as a coffee-pot. The spring tempted him, but he was too wise to blunder into a possible trap. He looked down at the nearest tracks and swore under his breath: they had been made by the man he had been following. The others meant nothing to him. This was not because Lanky could not recognize tracks once seen, but because for the past several days the wound in his head had dulled him and made him somewhat apathetic, through its constant and annoying pain, to things he ordinarily would have found of interest.

He spent half an hour looking for the place where the tracks of one horse left the hollow, and did not find it. If the animal had taken wing its departure could not have been better hidden. Scouting around the hollow until assured that it was harmless, he rode down into it and studied the ashes of the fire. They were cold, and so, also, was the ground under them. This meant either that the fire had been out for a considerable time or that it had not burned long; and knowing the age of his man's entering tracks, Lanky knew

that the fire had not burned long. There were boot tracks around the ashes; two very different kinds of tracks. One set had been made by low and broad-heeled miners' boots; the other set, by narrow and high-heeled punchers' boots. The tracks of the latter, where they led to a jumble of strange horse tracks, were spaced far apart, and the heels had been driven deep. Lanky patted the itching wound under the shirt-sleeve bandage while he considered this puzzle. He had seen these deep, small heel tracks at his man's camps, but he had not seen the others. Therefore, the high-heeled tracks leading to those of a strange horse and the strange horse tracks leading southward meant that his man had changed horses. This was further shown by the fact that the high-heeled tracks did not return to the fire, but abruptly disappeared.

Lanky grinned in modest self-congratulation, and turned his attention to the broad heel-marks. He followed them to the sidehill spring, saw that the tin utensil was a coffee bucket, and returned to the dead fire. They led him to a mess of horse tracks he well knew, and they died out as the hoof prints led away from the fire. It was plain now: His man had swapped a worn-out horse for a better, and left his unlucky companion to bear the brunt of possible pursuit. Lanky was disgusted by this proof of perfidy. By no stretch of imagination could he picture one of the Double-Y men playing so scurvy a trick on a friend. No wonder these human coyotes could not stand up against honourable men, when each of them stood ready and willing to sell out a companion. Lanky sneered, and then

and there determined to let Broad-heels go, and to show the other man that he was not as smart as he thought he was. To aid him in what he knew would be a long chase, Lanky got down on his hands and knees and minutely studied the four prints of this man's new horse. When he was sure that he could readily pick them out, he mounted and followed the trail at a lope; and suddenly drew up as another set of hoof prints came in from one side and joined them. The new prints were the same as the third set he had seen back near the hollow. He rode on again while he conjectured about them; and the sun was at the meridian when he espied Mesquite Jenkins coming toward him, leading a saddled roan horse.

Lanky drew up and waited, grinning cheerfully. Then he noticed the bandage, and later took cognizance of his friend's red and inflamed eyes.

"Hello, Kid," he called, riding forward again. "What did you run into?"

"Arizony Frank an' a sack of tobacco dust," growled Mesquite. "Shot grazed my arm—touched the funny bone. First chance I had to take a prisoner, but he had too much nerve to see it that way. I covered him up with stones so the wolves couldn't dig him out, found his cayuse, an' now I'm after that damned fox. Wonder how Arizony came to get his cayuse, an' the trouble that was trailin' it?"

"Huh!" grunted Lanky, at last learning the identity of Broad-heels. He rapidly sketched current history as he had read it by the signs in the peaceful hollow to the north.

"Well, he can hide his tracks just so long," said Mesquite. "We'll cut the search plumb in half, whittle it down, an' show that smart old coyote that he don't know everythin'. Here," he continued, and rapidly planned a course of action. "If we work together we got a good chance to get him. I'm takin' th' west end because I know all about them tracks out yonder. You take the east end, head north, an' we'll meet before night in that hollow where they changed cayuses." He considered a moment and then made arrangements that covered every possible contingency, Lanky nodding in hearty accord. A few moments later they parted, Lanky riding eastward to start on his section of the half-circle, while Mesquite rode in the opposite direction to make the other half of it. When they next met they would have eliminated three of the cardinal points of the compass.

Nightfall found them seated around a small fire in the agreed-upon hollow. Each had more than carried out instructions, and the course of the combined riding lacked less than thirty degrees of being a complete circle. Only a small northern wedge remained to be examined and they knew that Shanghai must have ridden that way. They had compared notes and now sat in silence, each busy with his own thoughts; and then Mesquite leaned forward slightly to peer at the three horses contentedly grazing in the lush grass near the spring. He could not make them out individually, for the moonlight did not reach them, but in his mind's eye he saw Shanghai's roan, and on the canvas of his memory one set of tracks stood out vividly.

"Lanky," he said, slowly and softly, gripped by a sudden inspiration. "Shanghai shore knows the tracks of his own cayuse, don't he?"

Lanky nodded, and grunted assent, and looked curiously across the dying embers at the cold face of his companion.

"I reckoned he would," muttered Mesquite. "Only asked to hear you say so," and he relapsed into silence.

Minutes passed with only the gentle cropping of the horses and an occasional despairing crackle of the dying fire to disturb it; and then Mesquite smiled frostily and leaned forward again.

"Let's trap that old fox with his own cayuse, Lanky," he suggested.

A gleam of appreciation showed in the older man's eyes; to trap a fox through the very cunning of the fox was a game worth while.

"Shoot, Kid," he replied. "Shoot slow, an' don't scatter too much. If we trap that old feller we got to wear gloves an' handle the bait with tongs. What's yore idear?"

Mesquite told him, slowly and in detail, Lanky interjecting an occasional question or suggestion, and so engrossed were they in their scheme that neither realized that the fire was out and that the night air was shrewdly chill. Under the cold stars and the colder moon they sat, almost whispering across the ashes of their fire, checking, rechecking, correcting, and smoothing a plan designed to trap a fox whose wariness was almost a proverb wherever he was known. They would bait the trap with Shanghai's own horse, his

best and surest means of escape; it would be like a beaver bait, for they would paint it with "medicine"—greed, and the desire to avenge the trickery that had stolen it from him here in this little hollow.

Lanky chuckled, reached to turn up the collar of his coat and to draw the garment tighter around him, and discovered that the collar had been turned up and that the coat already was drawn as snugly as it could be. He squirmed in his clothes to create a little skin friction, and abruptly realized the lateness of the hour and that he was downright cold. He shifted out of his cramped, cross-legged position and arose stiffly.

"Cripes," he growled, shivering. "Anybody that sees me ridin' along in the moonlight will shore reckon I'm an Injun wearing a cow-punch hat; for I'm figgerin' on wrappin' my blanket plumb around me till I thaw out."

Mesquite looked up, feeling somewhat selfish, although he knew that their parts had been wisely assigned.

"If you'd rather, Lanky, I'll ride the roan an' you can roll up here an' get a good night's rest." He grinned deprecatingly. "I'm younger than you, an' it don't hardly seem fair."

"Yes, yo're younger'n me," retorted Lanky, smiling through the moonlight at his thoughtful and considerate friend. The youth surely was changing for the better; not so very long ago Mesquite gave the comfort of another man no consideration whatever. "An' lemme tell you, Kid, while yo're preenin' yore feathers about bein' younger, that yo're goin' to be damn lucky if you

live long enough to reach my age. Take that to sleep with you, an' dream on it."

Mesquite smiled with a show of warmth rather foreign to him.

"Thanks to Hopalong, I reckon I'll get as old as you, an' mebby older," he replied. "Thanks to Hopalong, an' Red—an' you. Now you get the hell out of here, before that old coyote gets clean away."

"He's mebby got clean away, but I'm plumb shore he won't get away clean," chuckled Lanky, moving toward his saddle and the rest of his few belongings. "I don't reckon he ever takes a bath," he explained. He slung the saddle to a shoulder, juggled his rolled blanket under an arm and bent at the knees to pick up his rifle. "One thing I'm glad of: that roan has had a plumb good rest an' its belly is full of grass. So-long, you smart-Aleck."

While he spoke there had been a gentle flurry of movement on the other side of the dead fire, and a blanket-rolled cocoon had wriggled experimentally, and then lay still. From one end of it there now came a low grunt of satisfaction, quickly followed by the soft and regular breathing that tells of sleep.

Lanky looked closely at the rolled figure, grunted with disgust at the man who fell asleep during a conversation, and walked clumsily toward the grazing horses. The roan, not having been ridden all day, and being wise after the manner of range-bred horses, regarded Lanky's approach with undisguised suspicion; but the picket rope, and training, told it that the inevitable must be submitted to, and its opposition to

being saddled was more of a protest than any real effort to escape its tour of duty. In a few minutes the roan walked past the fire, bearing on its back a blanket-wrapped figure, and shying half-heartedly at another blanket-swathed figure lying on the ground. Then, gently rolling spurs bringing its mind back to its duty, the roan broke into a gentle canter and climbed the slope, to swing down on the other side and turn toward the north. And all through the bright night it pushed on, walking, cantering, and sometimes loping, as the nature of the country allowed; but, had the roan an observing and inquiring mind, it might have wondered why it was being guided over ground where its hoof marks would show.

## CHAPTER XVII

### AN UNEXPECTED CATCH

WITH the coming of dawn Shanghai began to look for the wider circle of the Double-Y puncher's riding, did not find it, and decided that Arizona's first pursuer had given up the chase. His horse having benefited greatly by the rest and the feeding, the old fox saddled up and made his way slowly toward the point where the sky cut down into the line of hills and indicated Jones's Pass. From time to time he chuckled over Arizona and the horse trade, picturing that worthy pacing Mesquite Jenkins southward in a race of death; but even having shunted the persistent Mesquite off his own trail, Shanghai regretted the loss of his roan. He felt that the time might easily come when he would bitterly miss the speed and staying power of the roan. He came to a patch of boggy ground, vividly advertised by its rioting greenery, and he pushed gently through a thick copse of willow brush; and as his vision took in a little, swampy opening in the brush he pulled up sharply, and with a growing suspicion regarded the horse tracks which lay across it.

Dismounting, he slipped back a short distance along his own trail, and then approached the point where the strange tracks entered the opening. They lay dark

and mysterious in the lush grass, the sweeping descent of the hoofs making long slashes, filled with shadow, in the coarse stems. The spongy and water-soaked earth, the massed and crushed grass stems, and the muddy water filling each track hid the identity of the horse that made them. Tracks such as these masked any individual characteristics of the hoofs; but, unsatisfactory as they were, they made him doubt that Arizona's pursuer had ridden that way. They appeared to be too large to belong to the ponies of either Red or Lanky. This suspicion set another aflame: Mesquite rode a comparatively big horse: could it be possible . . .

Like a hound on a hot scent Shanghai whirled and followed the tracks back toward solid ground, showing a grotesque agility surprising in one of his years. Ahead of him through the thinning greenery he saw a stretch of mixed sand and clay, soft enough to register impressions, but not soft enough to blur them. Reaching this spot he stopped, dropped to hands and knees, and minutely scrutinized each tell-tale impression; and smothered a curse, doubting his senses. The tracks had been made by his own roan! Arising long enough to get some of the kinks out of his back, he bent down again, his predatory old nose almost in the dirt. Having looked thoroughly, he felt of the tracks, seeking assurance through touch that his eyes saw truly. His face worked grotesquely and he passed a hand over his forehead, doubting even now. What had happened? Why had Arizona doubled back? Had he thrown Mesquite off the trail? The old lips tightened. Was

it possible that a fool like Arizona had succeeded where he, himself, had failed? Well, it was possible, because anything was possible; but he profanely announced to the clay patch that it was damned improbable.

If Arizona had not thrown Mesquite off his trail, and had ridden up this way, then Mesquite would be coming along like a gray wolf; and this particular and entirely too small section of country was no place for Shanghai. Perplexed, torn by conflicting facts and pious wishes, the old man went a little farther, to a patch of prickly pear rimming the top of a cut-bank; and again he paused. Moving gently in the air was something that never had grown on a prickly pear: a dark bit of wool from a loosened blanket. He had made enough tracks of his own by this time to catch the attention of any one following on the trail of the roan, and a few more would do no harm; so he hurried over to the bit of wool and examined it closely. It was the old familiar gray-blue, the colour of Arizona's, his own, and hundreds of other blankets. There was one thing for him to do: to back track and lie in wait a reasonable length of time for any pursuer, and he turned to go back to his horse when another look at the tracks made him pause. They had been made by an easily driven horse; nowhere was there any indication of speed; and he felt that if the maker of them had been pursued by such a wolfish hound as Mesquite these tracks would be spaced differently. The impossible had happened: Arizona had thrown Mesquite Jenkins off his trail and was now leisurely making his way toward Jones's Pass, and safety. One other possibility existed: had Mesquite

killed Arizona, and did he for some reason now ride the roan? He studied this possibility, remembered that Mesquite's blanket had been a dark gray, and believed that he would keep his own as a matter of cleanliness, since no advantage would accrue from a change.

Shanghai snorted.

"Huh! More likely that cub finally got his belly full of trailin' when he saw that the tracks was leadin' him plumb away from the rest of our gang, an' went on about his own business." He scratched his frowsy head and made up his mind then and there. He wanted that roan, if Mesquite was rambling around in the mountain park, and he wanted it very much now that it was not dangerous to ride it; and he would get it, with due caution and plenty of time.

Returning to his horse he mounted, went around the swampy place, and, picking up the roan's trail on the far side, took up the chase, stopping now and then on the higher ridges to peer around the country, as much interested in the back trail as in the forward one. One thing made him smile and gave him assurance: Arizona seemed to be in no hurry, judging from the way in which the trail ran. Instead of striking as straight for the pass as the country would permit, he was wandering down every draw that lay in the general direction of the pass, and his erratic course was adding miles to his riding. No man fleeing for his life, or in any doubt about its safety, would waste miles, time, and horseflesh like that; and Shanghai rubbed his hands together and began to plan the regaining of the roan.

He rode out of a dwindling draw, crossed the little

divide, and started down the other side; and jumped his horse behind a thicket of alder. Ahead of him a horseman pushed out of view, stopped when he came to the roan's trail, and looked all around him. It was Chick Cole, one of Shanghai's remaining companions in crime, and a man who was worth having at one's side in a fight. Instantly Shanghai made up his mind, called out cheerily, and rode on again. He winced and held up a hand as Chick's rifle swung up and covered him, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing swiftly.

Chick squinted pugnaciously from under the broad brim of his hat, the rifle muzzle dropping only a few inches; and then, muttering something under his breath, the owner of the weapon let it fall to his thigh and waited with some show of impatience for the old fox to approach.

"Glad ter see ye, Chick," called the old man, grinning like a coyote.

"Whose trail you follerin'?" demanded Chick, no welcome in his expression. He glanced down at the tracks before him, and up again. "Who made these?"

"Arizony," sighed Shanghai, shaking his head gently. His face was sorrowful. "An' I allus liked him so much, too, an' trusted him."

"Yeah," replied Chick, his squinting lids hiding his eyes. "I know you did. It was plumb touchin'."

Shanghai sniffled softly, and then got control over his lacerated feelings. He stiffened, a trace of anger in his expression. "I did; but I don't no more. When a man steals my cayuse, like he did, I ain't got no more feelin' for him. I thought a lot of that roan; it's a valu-

able animal. There ain't no cayuse in this part of the country as can run as fur or as fast as that animal. I'm on my way to git it back ag'in." He studied the tracks, slowly shaking his head.

For the first time Chick seemed to recognize the horse ridden by his outraged companion, and he repressed a grin. For once the old fox had been tricked, and he suppressed three cheers for Arizona Frank.

"Swapped you, did he, when you warn't lookin'?"

"He didn't swap me when I *was* lookin'!" snapped Shanghai, not caring to go further into details. He scratched his head. "Where's all the rest of us?" he demanded.

Chick spread his hands and scowled.

"Split up, an' everybody streakin' out of here," he answered. "Buck an' Hub are doublin' back, figgerin' to get out the way they got in. They reckon Broken Wheel is safer now, an' will be, seein' how the chase has drifted west. Tom Short an' Foxy Joe are strikin' north, aimin' to get up close to Big Moose, where they've got plenty of friends. I'm on my way to the Tetons, not thinkin' very much of either Broken Wheel or Big Moose. I got friends in the Hole."

"An' you got a plumb long way ter go, too," replied Shanghai; "an' it's a dangerous journey. Sometimes it seems there's deppities around that pass like pickets on a fence. Might be better, I reckon, to cross the south part of Laramie Plains, foller along up the North Platte, an' cross over to Green River. Brown's Hole can't be beat for a hide-out, or a winterin' place, in case you wants ter stay there. 'Tain't so well knowed,

generally, as Jackson's. Couple of fellers I know has got a shack in one of them canyons leadin' to it."

"There ain't no place safer than Jackson's, if you can once get in it; or no place with more game or better winterin'." Chick looked suspiciously at his companion. "Some of the boys are plumb curious about why our ambush didn't work. Where did you an' Hoskins go to, an' why didn't you come back?" He listened to the persuading explanations, made doubly effective by the news of Hoskins's death, could find no fault with them, and remained—unconvinced. It seemed that he was well acquainted with the old liar beside him.

"Jackson's?" mused Shanghai, thoughtfully. "Wait till I git back my cayuse an' I'll go with you."

Chick pondered this offer for a moment and made up his mind. He had no love for Shanghai, not trusting the old man; but he did like Arizona Frank, who was not so tricky and who was a much better man in a fight. Naturally neither knew that Arizona was dead.

"How far ahead is he?" asked Chick, trying to read the tracks. He was an indifferent plainsman, of a later and more careless generation, which spent more time in the scraggly frontier towns and their vicious saloons and gambling halls than out in the open.

"Only a couple of hours; goin' with me?"

"Yes; come on."

They rode rapidly along the plain trail, careless because they were following a friend, Shanghai paying no more attention to the rear than he did ahead. By now he was convinced that Arizona was making that trail; but

he was not convinced that Mesquite had been thrown off the scent, or had given it up; and this was the reason why he wanted Chick with him. He could always find a good reason, from his reputation as a superior plainsman, for Chick to stop and wait while he rode on to get the roan; thus leaving a buffer between him and Mesquite. After leaving the buffer, the first sound of gunfire behind him would send him into another canny flight.

Chick went along in hope that he could get word to Arizona, give the old man the slip or drive him off, and have a more reliable companion for the long ride to the Tetons. Shanghai might surprise Arizona and get the drop on him; but with Chick behind the old man he would have no chance to make his play stick. The matter of that useless ambush and Shanghai's treacherous flight was still sticking in Chick's craw.

Riding ahead by the length of a horse, Shanghai led the pursuit after the roan, his old eyes missing nothing that the trail revealed; and they had found nothing out of the ordinary until three hours had passed, when he came to a little sand drift piled against a small rocky ridge. The tracks led straight across this, but near its farther edge the trail developed a difference. Shanghai pulled up swiftly and raised a hand to check his companion. Swinging out of the saddle, the old man went forward on foot and bent over the footprints which so thickly covered an area of two or three feet.

This was the place where the rider of the roan had found his cinches loosening and had dismounted to tighten them. Shanghai suspected the cause for the

stop, but cared nothing for that part of it: what he was interested in was the boot tracks themselves. After a few moments' close scrutiny he found a tremendous interest in them, for they were too small to have been made by Arizona Frank. For a moment he froze in pained surprise; had he, like an old fool, been trailing Mesquite Jenkins, the one man he had tried so hard to get away from? He felt sick at the pit of his stomach, the reaction from a fear which struck him so swiftly as to threaten nausea. Here was a fine kettle of fish, a ghastly joke that he had been playing on himself! For a moment he became panicky, but mastered the feeling and set his fox's mind to find the best way out of it.

Holding his breath, he bent closer to the prints and studied them again. There slowly dawned on him the knowledge that they had not been made by Mesquite, for they also were too small for that. What devil's trick was this that was being played on him? Egoism and habitual caution made him believe that it was being played on him and on no one else. When he had last seen Arizona, unknown to both him and Mesquite, riding to his death, that person had been astride the roan and racing southward through the brush; and now Shanghai felt certain that Mesquite had stuck doggedly to the roan's tracks and had gone in pursuit of Arizona, believing him to be Shanghai. That much was now certain, and being so, and being coupled to the fact of these small footprints, meant that Arizona had not escaped, and that someone else was now riding the roan. Who could it be? It should be, according to the other reasoning, no one but Mes-

quite; but the tracks said it was not Mesquite. What third party had been in the vicinity to interpose himself with Mesquite's permission, and be allowed to ride the roan? He must be a friend of Mesquite's, and there were only two friends of Mesquite within a hundred miles or more: Red Connors and Lanky Smith. The tracks were too small for Red, and so, therefore, they must have been made by Lanky. Then there was a good reason why these horse tracks had rambled so and had crossed so much soft ground: a reason very plain to be understood.

The old man kept his face turned down, away from the curious eyes of his companion while he thought the matter out; and righteous contempt for his own blundering and a stabbing fear for his own safety made the old head bend lower to hide his expression. Mastering himself and once again assuming a poker face, he slowly arose and turned to Chick with a chuckle.

"Cinches slipped," he explained, waving a careless hand downward. "It's plain enough. It's also plain to see we're right close to Arizony." He paused and simulated thought. "Tell ye what: suppose you stay here, while I push on an' git the roan? Ain't no use of lettin' Arizony see that yer takin' a hand in it, an' gittin' him down on you. Ain't no reason a-tall. Might be better if you rode back to them willers an' holed up in the thicket, out o' sight, but where ye can see the trail. I won't be long."

Chick grunted his acceptance of the idea, and turned to go back to the willow thicket; but as soon as the old man had become lost to sight he swung from the trail

and rode at top speed on a circle, working back to the tracks when he thought he was ahead of the old fox; but he cut back too soon, and slowed up to follow Shanghai at a distance. It was wise that he kept at a distance, for the old man suddenly developed a great interest in that back trail.

Shanghai pushed on until he came to a purling brook flowing over a bed of golden sand; and he turned into it, riding upstream, the trail of the roan abandoned. He was through with this mountain park, with Broken Wheel, with the surrounding country; he was disgusted with himself, and he was frightened by his narrow escape. He was going to circle back to Big Moose and hide out in the hills in his old place of refuge.

Chick Cole came to the brook, glanced idly across it while he let his horse drink; and he stared with strong disbelief at the tracks of a single horse where there should have been the tracks of two. The answer to this riddle was plain: Shanghai had taken to the stream to blot out his trail and was at this moment riding with or against its waters. Did the old man think the roan had become a fish? No; but evidently he had begun to suspect that Chick was more of a friend of Arizona's than of his own, and he was playing safe by getting away. Chick laughed in his throat, having to admire the old man's uncanny astuteness. Shanghai knew that he had no chance to recover the roan against both Arizona and himself; and, fearing danger, had fled.

"Long-headed old son-of-a-gun," chuckled Chick, and pushed on again at better speed along the trail of his friend, Arizona, who had stolen the old man's

horse, which was a feat distinctly to be proud of: and at times his shoulders shook with laughter. He could picture Shanghai pushing his crow-bait mount through the creek to hide his trail as he scurried from possible danger like a coyote gray with age and wise with cunning. He was eager to overtake Arizona and laugh with him at Shanghai's discomfiture as they two made their way toward a region of safety. Coming to the top of a ridge he turned in his saddle from the habit of caution and looked back along his trail; and what he saw disturbed him greatly. A faint cloud of dust was moving toward him. Had Shanghai turned aside to let him get in front and to follow him? Vague distrust bothered him. He had no confidence in the old man, and he had a vastly better horse; Shanghai might have given up the pursuit of Arizona and was now following to improve the quality of his horseflesh at the expense of Chick. And the maker of that dust cloud might not be Shanghai; it might be one of the Double-Y punchers hot on the trail.

Ahead of him was a narrow cut in the ridge, a miniature canyon. The trail lay through it, and he could see it running on for several hundred yards beyond. The identity of the rider behind him was of pressing moment; he must learn it, and learning it, must act on the knowledge. His eyes grew hard as he figured the possibilities of the gorge, a first-class place for an ambush; and he spurred his horse and raced for it, through it, and on along the tracks until a bend lost them from the sight of any one nearing the little canyon from the south. Here he swung sharply about, circled back to

the gorge, picketed his horse, and scrambled up the farther slope to a broken ridge overlooking the trail. Settling down, he examined his rifle as a matter of habit, found it loaded, and slid the barrel out between two humps of clay, the trail squarely under its muzzle at point-blank range. If the pursuer was Shanghai it would mean treachery, which, added to other treachery, would justify shooting the old man's horse from under him and leaving him afoot and harmless. If it was one of the Double-Y punchers he never would return to his ranch.

The dust cloud died out or increased, according to the nature of the ground over which the rider passed; but it came steadily forward at the same swift pace. A speck pushed up into sight over a distant ridge, growing swiftly larger as the shoulders and body of a man and the body of the horse came into sight.

Chick swore under his breath, and then exulted; Mesquite Jenkins was riding to his death, and Mesquite's death was something to be greatly desired. Chick examined the sight, changed it twice as he shifted the range, and then set it in the lowest notch and aimed at a grass tuft growing on the other side of the gorge well inside of fifty yards. He did not intend to flirt with a longer range, or to miss his target. One shot would rid him and his friends of an accursed pest.

Mesquite rode on without checking pace. He had seen Shanghai's trail disappear in the brook, and he knew that time would be lost in deciding whether it ran upstream or down. He had, miles back, seen where Shanghai had met that other man whose trail went

along with the others. Better once more to let Shanghai get away for the time and to track down his companion, who could be no other than a member of the band.

Then Mesquite came to a place in the trail where Shanghai's friend had drawn rein to look back. The horse had tramped about a bit, turning sidewise before it was sent on again. This mistake was a little one, but out of little things big ones grow. Ahead lay a small canyon, and through it he could see the double line of tracks stretching into the distance. He became thoughtful: had the man he was pursuing seen his dust when he had turned to look back? Should he circle that gorge and investigate it on foot from one side? He knew that he was very close to the maker of both of the tracks; and he caught sight of a grass stem slowly moving upward from one of the newer prints. At another place a tiny edge of sand crumbled and fell into a print. The pursued could be only a few minutes ahead of him now.

To reconnoitre the gorge would be to lose time and to string out the chase; not to reconnoitre it was to gamble with danger and to place himself in a possible death trap. He rode slowly on as he argued with himself, and then he checked the horse again. In the loose soil at the side of the tracks was a deep mark at right angles to the direction of the trail. According to the agreement this must have been made by Lanky's rifle butt to tell Mesquite that he was going to quit riding and hole up not far away, where he would be close to the trail. Again Mesquite looked at the distant gorge. At no place along the trail was there a better spot than this

gorge for Lanky to lie in wait; but, then, what had happened to Shanghai's friend? His tracks led through the little canyon. Had he outwitted Lanky? At this thought, Mesquite rode on again at a brisk pace, looking for some sign of his friend; and suddenly he saw what he was looking for. A sombrero raised in the air above a rock, moving up and down three times. Mesquite turned from the trail in answer to this warning and rode into the brush at his right, to become hidden before dismounting.

Up in the gorge Chick swore angrily and wondered what had warned the rider. He believed that Mesquite's action, after all, had been caused by ordinary caution: the gorge was a dangerous-looking place and properly would fall under the suspicion of a cautious man. Now he had a game on his hands that he did not relish: to get back to his horse in order to safeguard it, and to outguess a cautious and suspicious enemy scouting on foot.

Chick slipped back from his little rampart, and after half-a-dozen yards of swift crawling he arose and turned to run down the slope toward his horse; and, as he whirled, something flashed downward past his eyes and gripped his arms and body like an iron band. He set himself against the pull of the lariat, dropped the rifle to grasp the rope and make enough slack to get out of the loop, and twisted as he did so.

He saw Lanky Smith coming along the rope hand-over-hand, grinning sarcastically. Chick, amazed by the whole surprising performance and by the materialization of Lanky when the trail said only Arizona,

managed to work his right elbow below the loop, forced his arm with a sudden surge of strength against the rope, gained a moment's play, and jerked out his Colt. The rope yanked savagely and Lanky's voice warned him. Two crashes roared in the chasm and the rope slackened. Chick stumbled backward, dropping his gun, and fell sideways; Lanky staggered in the direction of the pull of the rope, tripped on one of his own spurs, and sprawled on his stomach and face, his own gun flying from his hand. As he went down he struck his head against a rock and was momentarily stunned.

Neither man was wounded seriously, and both groped for the lost guns as their heads cleared. Lanky's lay ten feet away, half buried in loose sand; Chick's was almost within reach, but hidden by a tuft of bunchgrass. The latter's frantically groping hand struck and seized the weapon as Lanky touched his own; and a shadow fell between them, the shadow of Mesquite as he climbed into sight up the steep side of a low wash. Chick, believing Lanky to be the lesser of two evils, swung his Colt on Mesquite an instant before that person caught sight of him; but as he pulled the trigger Lanky's snap shot seared and burned up his forearm, destroying his aim; and as an echo to Lanky's gun, there came a shot from above, where Mesquite lowered a smoking Colt and peered through its swirling fog of gray.

Lanky sat up and blinked rapidly several times.

"Hello, Kid," he called. "Got here just a mite too late." Something seemed to bother him, and he shook

his head as if to clear it. "How many times did that thief shoot?"

"Once, Lanky; then I got him," answered Mesquite; "but if it hadn't been for yore shot I'd be dead right now."

Lanky frowned as he tried to understand this puzzle.

"Don't see how you figger that out," he said, argumentatively. "He was swingin' his gun on me when I pulled trigger. Would 'a' served me right if he'd got me. That damn ropin' habit will get me killed, shore as shootin'."

"He was firin' at me when yore bullet hit his arm, and made him miss. You saved my life, Lanky; though you shore didn't know it."

"That so?" inquired the old Bar-20 rope expert. He considered this statement for a moment, and then grinned. "I'm allus doin' some damn fool thing, ain't I? Got a chew of tobacco on you, Kid?"

## CHAPTER XVIII

### MUD AND SMOKE

THE fire sputtered and hissed and would have been drowned but for the fact that it was built on a little rise of ground. Huddled under a brush wickiup covered with their slickers and blankets Mesquite Jenkins and Lanky Smith sat watching the fire, occasionally tossing a stick of firewood on it. All night long it had rained in sheets, and the murmuring rill they had camped beside now rushed turbulently past in the faint radiance of the fire, swishing and gurgling, and steadily climbing up its banks. The sound of the driving rain on the leaves overhead made a monotonous patter. The two friends had slept through the first part of the night, delightfully lulled by the downpour, the dry snugness of the wickiup, and by the warmth and glow of the fire; but some time after midnight an inquiring stream had pushed through the wand walls of their brushy tent and had grown rapidly. It spread out and, after turning and twisting, both sleepers had awakened to find a shallow moat around the inside of their habitation. Sitting side by side on the only dry spot remaining, they hugged their knees and waited with stubborn stoicism for daylight.

"I ain't worryin' so much about bein' out of grub as I am about bein' out of the makin's," said Lanky, with a

good humour remarkable under the circumstances. He tossed another stick on the fire and watched the little streamer of sparks rush up to be blotted out by the rain. "There's elk an' deer enough to keep our stummicks filled; but I shore would like a smoke."

"I ain't worryin' near as much about grub or tobacco as I am about this cursed rain blottin' out every track," replied Mesquite, gently touching his wounded arm.

Lanky's fingers were exploring pockets already well explored, knowing them to be barren of tobacco, but persisting in the search as though some miracle might have slipped a sack in one of them. With a sigh he desisted and smiled understandingly at his companion.

"There shore won't be a track left," he admitted. "But let me tell you, Kid, if it'll make you feel any better, that there ain't been nobody for years that has made that old fox Shanghai hump himself over the landscape like you has. An' after the bull-doggin' he's been through since you got on his trail, I'm willin' to bet that he's streakin' it out of this part of the country as fast an' hard as he can fan his cayuse. You got him just about scared to death with yore bloodhound trailin', an' he's shore headin' for some place that he figgers is safe. When he gets there he'll hole up tight as a scared prairie dog."

"That's just what's makin' me cuss," growled the youth. "I've got him so scared he won't give me a chance to get close to him, now that this rain is lettin' him get away. Why, I was near enough a couple of times to near put my sights on him; an' once I had him tied up like a bundle of hides!"

Lanky inched out of the edge of the rising moat, and chuckled.

"Huh! 'Tain't yore fault that he got away that time," he said. "You couldn't lick the bunch that jumped on yore back. Shucks: I'm figgerin' you done right well to get as many of them thieves as you did. Me an' Red didn't get none, did we? Didn't you get 'em all?"

"Seven," growled Mesquite; "but seven ain't twelve." He reached toward his shirt pocket for the tobacco sack that was no longer there, and grunted. "What'll Hoppy say about me fallin' down like this?"

Lanky's laughter filled the wickiup, and for an instant he let his hand rest lightly on his companion's shoulder.

"He'll say yo're a shore enough wonder, Kid, to do as well as you have. He never figgered you'd get 'em all."

"But I ain't took no prisoners yet," muttered the youth, his hand straying to the deputy sheriff's badge on the under side of his vest; the badge he had so cordially hated, and which he did not regard any too favourably, even now.

Lanky hid his satisfaction at what that expressed regret told him, and he tried to maintain a poker face. Hopalong was right! The germ of a regard for law and order was beginning to grow in this young man's consciousness. More than anything else that Lanky could report about this expedition, this news would please Hopalong. His own liking for the youngster went up a few degrees.

"Well, I don't hardly reckon you've had many

chances to take any prisoners, Kid," he replied. "They didn't give you no chance. An' if you had taken one, what would you 'a' done with him? If you managed to get him back to Twin River, you'd have to leave the rest of the gang, an' give 'em a chance to get clean away."

"Well; they've got away now," retorted Mesquite. "I'm goin' back to Broken Wheel to try to get trace of some of 'em; but if I don't find any sign, I won't know what to do next. That's the worst of bein' a stranger to all this north country."

"I ain't no stranger to it," replied Lanky, grinning. "We'll go to Broken Wheel, scout around, an' lay in more supplies; an' then we'll head for the country up around Big Moose. That used to be one of the gang's hangouts. They've got a lot of friends up that way, an' sooner or later they're bound to drift up there. Wouldn't surprise me a heap if Red was ridin' that way right now."

Red Connors, their missing friend, had been given a part to play that had taken him from them and put him to watching the passes leading northward from this mountain park. Neither had seen or heard from him for several days and, consequently, had no knowledge of his present whereabouts; but Lanky, knowing his old friend pretty well, was about convinced that Red was on his way to Big Moose. Lanky had no way of knowing that he was wrong.

"Um," said Mesquite. "Then we better make good time to Broken Wheel an' then lather our cayuses for Big Moose. Might 'a' been better if we'd not

turned them other cayuses loose: we could use 'em for changin' mounts. Still, they would be a lot of trouble." He thought for a moment and continued: "After we leave Broken Wheel an' get about halfway to Big Moose, we can circle south an' make a try at pickin' up the trail of one of them fellers. This rain mebby ain't reached that far, or got there ahead of 'em. Give me a trail to foller an' I'm right at home."

"I'll bet my last shirt on that," said his companion with a chuckle. Lanky's admiration for his companion's trailing ability threatened to become boundless. "Kid, however did you learn so damn much about trailin'?"

Mesquite smiled and stretched one leg after the other.

"My father," he answered. "He was a great trailer. He should 'a' been, too, seein' that he was captured by the Utes when he was a little kid an' near growed up with 'em. He told me that the Comanches were the best Indian trailers in the world, except, mebby, the Apaches; but he said some of the Utes was plenty good enough. The best trailers of all were some Mexicans that were captured when they were kids an' were brought up by the Comanches or Apaches. My dad went on several raidin' parties as far south as the Rio Grande before he managed to escape." Mesquite smiled gently. "The old man thought a lot of me, an' put in most of his spare time playin' with me. We used to go trailin' around the settlement together, me draggin' along behind him, an' when I got so I could foller one set of tracks without losin' 'em, he used to

laugh hisself half to death. He shore knew sign, an' he had an amazin' lot of patience."

"Then that's how you learned to make this here wickiup so smart an' quick, I reckon. What else did he show you? Learn you to talk the sign language?" There was a little anxiety in Lanky's voice.

Mesquite shook his head. "No; the Utes didn't use it enough to know much about it," he answered. "They was a mountain tribe an' didn't have much to do with the prairie tribes. When they met 'em it meant a fight; except under the walls of Bent's Fort; an' when they were there they wouldn't mix at all with the Cheyennes or Arapahoes. When they went down on the prairies after buffalo meat they were near scared to death of runnin' into one of the prairie tribes; an' the prairie tribes when they went into the mountains to get in one of the parks, were near scared to death of the Utes. Each knowed they were in the enemy's country."

Lanky stifled a sigh of relief at his companion's confessed ignorance of the sign language, and leaned forward to look up at the sky. Dawn was at hand, and the rain seemed to be letting up. He yawned and stretched in the cramped quarters, and rubbed a leg that was half asleep.

"Y-e-e-a-a-h, u-m-m-m! Won't be long now before we can pull our stakes an' head over east," he said. "My stummick says we got to get us an elk or a deer before many hours go past."

"I'll get one," replied Mesquite. "This country is plumb full of their sign. Reckon it won't do no harm

to shoot off a gun *now*." He shifted slightly to ease his legs, and rubbed his smoke-smarting eyes. "Hope Red don't beat us to Big Moose by very long," he added. Had he known the facts he would have been content.

Red Connors, wearied of watching a pass without results, had spent the rainy night under a ledge of rock. He was disgusted and discouraged, nearly out of food and tobacco, and his lively imagination had pictured his missing friends as being very successful in their man hunt, while he had failed utterly in his part. This was no fault of his, but this fact gave him small solace.

Adding to his small fire and grudging himself enough food from his dwindling supply to make half a breakfast, he put some of his thoughts into words.

"Betcha them rustlin' coyotes never even heard of this here pass," he growled; "an' I betcha Lanky an' the Kid shore knowed it when they sent me up here to watch it. Here I am, near out of grub an' smokin', while they're chasin' around down south rollin' cigarettes, stuffin' themselves with bacon, beans, an' biscuits, an' havin' some excitement. I ain't goin' to stand for it no longer; not no longer! I'm pullin' out of here as soon as I can saddle up an' get back to Broken Wheel for some ham an' eggs an' a couple of drinks. Watch the passes, says the Kid! Watch hell, says I! I've watched all the passes I'm goin' to watch. Far's I'm concerned all the cattle thieves in the world can use this pass for a bed ground. Damn that fire! Why didn't I get more wood when I was about it?"

An hour later Red was in the saddle, scorning the

lessening rain, and riding as straight as he could for Broken Wheel, his rifle resting across his saddle in case its owner's pious hope was justified. If he were lucky he might blunder on to one or more of the fugitive band, and in his present state of mind he hoped it would be more than one. In this he was doomed to disappointment, for all that day and the next he pushed on without getting sight of any human being or the fresh tracks made by one. Intermittent rains kept the ground soft and gave it no chance to dry out. At mid-forenoon of the third day, as he topped a small rise, he leaned forward in the saddle and stared exultantly at the sign on the far slope: the fresh and muddy tracks of two horses.

Under favourable circumstances Red could read horse tracks as well as the majority of the plains riders of his day; but the circumstances were not favourable, for the tracks were not clean cut in the mushy earth. Hoping to come to some place, some stretch of sand or earth hard enough to make some resistance to the horses' hoofs, he patted the rifle and pushed on along the fresh trail. The distances between the prints of the hoofs on the same side of each animal was about three feet and he knew that the riders had gone on at a walk. This pleased him, but he was not pleased by the way they had persistently kept to slushy mud, and thus wittingly or unwittingly had hidden the tell-tale characteristics of the tracks. His displeasure over this, however, faded slowly as the significance of some of their erratic riding became plain, and he came to the conclusion that the riders had deliberately done this to hide their identity. If this were so, it plainly in-

dicated that they feared pursuit, which indicated that they were members of the band which he and his friends had been trailing. He grinned, pulled his hat tighter on his head, readjusted a fold of his slicker, and urged his mount into a trot.

"Go off an' leave me holdin' the sack, will you?" he asked his absent friends, his voice exultant. "Stick me up in that pass, out of the way, so you could hog the game, huh? I'll show you somethin' purty soon!"

Gone was his sullen depression at this promise of action, and he hummed under his breath as he trotted along the trail, his eyes searching constantly and his gun balanced for quick use. Pushing on until afternoon he rode along the side of a steep valley, emerged from it, and swiftly checked his horse. A column of smoke was filtering above the trees of a distant woods, and straight toward it lay the tracks he had been following. Turning his horse, he rode back a few rods and then, angling down the slope, struck out on a roundabout course through heavy cover to approach the camp unseen.

Out in the open the morning wind and sun had dried the ground except in hollows and washes; but when Red entered the forest surrounding the sought-for campfire he found everything wet. Riding as far as he dared, he at last reluctantly cached his horse by picketing it in a small opening in the brush which covered a fire-made clearing in the woods. Half an hour later, under his breath cursing the coldness and the wetness of the ground, he dragged himself a few inches at a time up the far side of a little hill, straight

for the climbing smoke column which marked his objective. He was a sight, for he was mud from his feet to his head. He even had managed to get mud on his back, and he was wet to the skin. By the time he had reached his present position he was savage from mud, water, and general misery; but his state of mind made him all the more determined to go through with his stalking. What a joke he would have on his two friends if he could capture or kill two of the cattle thieves within half a day's ride of the town!

Reaching the top of the hill he slipped off his sombrero and raised his head to peer into the woods. The odour of the fire was now strong, and he heard the intermittent sounds of horses moving as they grazed. Shifting to the left he squirmed along the hill, working to get sight of the camp, his sombrero tucked under one arm. Between him and the camp was a thicket, a tangled and baffling mass of greenery; and within a few feet of this was a muddy streak on the hillside, where excess storm water escaped into the ravine below. A little trickle was running down it now, and he shivered as he crawled into it; and then he froze as it broke into a murmur of protest at being dammed by his body. To him it seemed as though the sound could be heard for rods. After listening for a moment he went on again, with a silence, considering the mud and the thin brush, which reflected credit on his abilities.

The camp at last lay under his eyes and he studied it, warned of danger by its lack of occupants. Had they somehow learned of his proximity? Reason said that they had, for there lay the partly skinned and butchered

carcass of a deer. Two saddles were piled on the far side of the clearing, but in such a position that they told him nothing about their owners. He looked all around him, expecting a challenge or a bullet at any moment; but to go back was as dangerous as to go forward, and Red hated to retreat. Two to one, and with him doing the moving about, they had the best of it; and he could not lie quiet in his exposed position with any more safety. Cover was what he needed, and cover was what he would try to get; once hidden he could let them do the moving. He would try to wriggle to some bit of cover from where he could keep an eye on the horses, feeling that they would be a grave concern of the men he was after. As long as he could see the horses it would be like keeping a deer lick under his gun. Slipping down the hill a few feet, he moved on again to work around to a thicket on the other side of the camp, from where he was certain that he could see the animals.

While Red moved so slowly and cautiously, another man, well back in the forest and on the other side of the ravine, was trotting in a half crouch, circling in an effort to discover any fresh trail leading toward the camp. This person found the muddy tracks of the lone stalker and, throwing his rifle forward, swiftly followed them.

Red at last gained a point below the coveted thicket and began to crawl up the slope toward it. Inch by inch he neared the top of the hill and finally peered over the rim. A score of paces away a muddy boot protruded, and through the mass of leafless stems near

the ground he could make out the general bulk of the wearer. His rifle slid forward, covering the unsuspecting man, and he was about to call out when caution stopped the words: if he made a sound or tried to capture this thief at such a distance he might be discovered and shot down by the thief's companion. The thought made him glance quickly toward the camp, and his gaze rested on the two saddles, now broadside to him. They looked very familiar; they were very familiar, entirely too familiar after all the mud and muck he had crawled through. Having nothing to fear, since they belonged to his friends, he gave a snort of disgust, and then slid quickly down the hill as a bullet touched his hair; and Red's hair was none too thick. For a snap shot from a swiftly reversed rifle Lanky had done very well, and the sudden thrashing in the thicket which followed the crash of the gun indicated that the marksman was eager to get a second shot.

"You blame fool!" shouted Red, standing up and shaking a freckled fist at the top of the hill. "What the hell you tryin' to do?"

Lanky's anxious face peered over the rim and its expression changed to outraged disgust.

"You callin' me a fool, after snortin' like that under the feet of a man all keyed up to do some quick shootin'?" he yelled. "Of all the stupid Siwashes yo're the worst! There I was, all eyes an' ears, with my finger as tight on the trigger as it dast be, an' you blunder up like a loco cow an' *snort!* Don't you never do that ag'in, you —— ——!"

"Anybody'd reckon, to hear you, that it was *yore* hair that bullet touched!" retorted Red, who firmly believed that he was the aggrieved party of the whole affair. "Lookit me, mud an' water from my feet to my hat! Fine mess *I* am, on account of you holin' up! What was you doin', huntin' Injuns?" he sarcastically demanded.

"Huntin' Injuns yoreself!" snapped Lanky. "You ain't no wetter than I am, me layin' in a pile of bushes that are worse'n sponges! You never did have no sense, *no*how!" He glanced sideways and levelled an accusing arm in the same direction. "Lookit what you done to the Kid, makin' him waller in the mud an' water. Lookit him!"

Red looked and saw Mesquite standing up and grinning at the pair of them. Mesquite was a study in mud, and dirty water dripped from every sag in his clothes. He had followed swiftly on Red's trail, and was lying with his rifle covering the rear of Lanky's thicket when Red's snort had started things.

"Yeah, I see him!" shouted Red, belligerently. "I see another fool like yoreself! You go an' pick out all the muddy ground to travel over so you can blur yore tracks, build a fire that smokes to heaven, an' then blame *me* for trailin' you! What did you expect me to do? Come a-skippin' an' a-singin' through the woods? That may be the way you fools do yore trailin', but it shore ain't *my* way. Another quarter of an inch lower down, an' that jackass up there would 'a' blowed my brains out!"

"I couldn't 'a' blowed any brains out of yore head if

I'd held an *inch* lower—not with a double-barrel shotgun, I couldn't, you Flathead!" retorted Lanky. "Here's the Kid an' me, reasonable dry after all the rain, an' then you come along chasin' Injuns! *Now* look at us! Won't you never get no sense a-tall?"

"Aw, go to hell!" snapped Red, and turned to glare at Mesquite. "What's the fool reason for you fellers blurrin' yore trail like that? Why'd you build a smoke-pot fire? You ketchin' *loco* from that tumblebug friend of ourn?"

Mesquite choked back his laughter, wiped his eyes with a muddy sleeve, which did not add to his appearance, and slowly stood erect.

"Take things easy, you two!" he begged. "I got a pain in my side already. Red, yo're a picture! You must 'a' rooted like a hawg," and his laughter rang out again.

Seeing that Mesquite was unable to answer his question, Red turned to Lanky and repeated, it, with trimmings.

"If you had any sense," retorted Lanky, "you'd know why we made that kind of a trail. The Kid reckoned mebby if we masked it, some blunderin' fool would foller it. He did foller it. We built that smoky fire because there wasn't no dry wood, which suited us, seein' the smoke was our bait. It was a bait, an' it worked: we caught a doodle bug, you red-headed fool! Any more questions you want to ask?"

Red slid and floundered as he climbed the hill, and stalked off to the camp in haughty dignity, muttering under his breath. Helping himself to a venison steak,

he picked up a trimmed and peeled wand and turned toward the fire to broil his dinner. Lanky followed in grouchy silence, Mesquite trailing after the pair of them wiping his eyes and feeling of his sides. Grim tragedy had passed them by: If Red had fired from his position under the top of the hill he could have killed Lanky; and if he had straightened out of his crouch his head would have pushed into Mesquite's vision and he could have been killed in turn. In silence the meat was cooked and eaten, and then, feeling better but still a little tender, Lanky grinned experimentally and looked at Red.

"We got seven, all told; how many did you get, up there at the pass?"

"Just as many as you figgered I'd get!" snapped Red. "How could I get any of 'em when you an' the Kid was close herdin' 'em away from me all the time?" He looked from one to the other. "What you been doin' since I saw you last?"

They told him in detail while the fire steamed the water out of their clothes, and in his interest in their words his belligerency slowly faded. By the time he had heard their stories he was somewhat restored to good humour; so much so that he sympathized with Mesquite for Shanghai's escape.

"Don't you chafe none, Kid," he said. "I got a purty good idea where we can pick up *his* trail. When a fox has a hole that ain't been found or hunted for, an' where he's allus been able to find safety, he ain't forgettin' it, or leavin' it, no matter how much he's been chased when he was away from it. An' he's been chased

so hard and far an' close that once he gets back to his hang-out he'll stick close to it till things quiet down. I wish I could have seen him when he was ridin' between you an' Lanky, like a blame fool; an' when he smelled out that somethin' was terrible wrong." Red leaned back and laughed as he pictured the old fox's indignation.

"We got to go to Broken Wheel to get supplies, an' clean up this end of the country," said Mesquite. "As long as we're here there ain't no use lettin' things slide, an' mebby overlookin' a couple of them fellers. *Then,*" he leaned forward eagerly, "we'll hunt the old fox on his home ridges!"

"Let's see: there's Foxy Joe, Hub Hendricks, Buck Eades, an' Tom Short left out of that gang," said Lanky. "Five out of twelve. Hum-m! Buck an' Hub allus was purty thick, an' they'll likely team up; likewise Foxy Joe an' Tom Short will likely team up. The last two are Big Moose bums, an' we'll mebby get sight of them up that way. Yes, Kid; we'll shore assay Broken Wheel, *after dark*, quiet like. That bein' so we've got plenty of time to get there. 'Tain't more'n four hours away right now." He glanced at the fire and swore. "Cussed near out, with us settin' right ag'in it! We'll build it up, dry out, an' take things easy till time to start. Wish to heaven I had a smoke!"

Mesquite, having scraped off the more superabundant mud from his clothes, dropped the stick and gazed reflectively at the carcass of the deer.

"I was thinkin' we might better jerk what's left of that meat," he said, thoughtfully, his mind running

into the future. "We shore got plenty of smoke for it."

Red and Lanky exchanged sly grins, and the former spoke.

"But what's th' use, Kid?" he asked. "We'll be in town to-night, an' we can get all the grub we want."

"I ain't shore we better show ourselves so soon," replied Mesquite. "If any of them coyotes have headed for Broken Wheel, they'll be watchin' the hills close an' ready to streak out at the first sign of us."

"But we'll ride in after dark," said Lanky, a little worried by this threatened postponement of a smoke. "We'll scout up to all the winders an' see who's in town before we show ourselves."

"An' if them fellers have got any sense they'll be layin' low where we can't see 'em, mebby outside the town in some shack; an' they'll have friends on the lookout to pass 'em the word. Everybody in town knows us by sight."

Lanky groaned.

"There's somethin' in that," remarked Red, "as the feller said when he found bugs in the bed. They shore know us, an' we don't know who their friends are. Just what's in yore mind, Kid?"

Lanky cut in impolitely. "I don't know what's in *his* mind, or *yourn*, neither," he said, glaring from one to the other; "but I shore know what's in *my* mind, an' it's done took root deeper'n any mesquite tree you ever saw. *I'm* goin' to get me the makin's of some cigarettes, an' I'm goin' to get 'em before sun-up to-morrow. *That's* what's in *my* mind!"

"I ain't surprised a hull lot," retorted Red, "except that yore mind could have all of that in it at once. You ain't strained it, have you?"

"An' no damn smart-Aleck remarks from a Flathead can change me a mite!" rejoined Lanky. "You heard me palaver, an' I'm shore set."

"So's a mule!" retorted Red. "For a measly cigarette you'd spoil the only chance we've got of pickin' up a murderin' cow-thief or two before we get out of this part of the country. If yore boots was bigger you'd mebby have more room for brains!"

"That so?" demanded Lanky. "What business you got to stick yore iron in this here fire? How many of them ambushin' skunks did *you* get?"

"I shore miscalled it when I said boots!" flared Red, flushing. "You an' the Kid know why I didn't get none of 'em! Next time I'll see that you don't shove me off in a corner to play mumbly-peg, an' that's flat! How many did *you* get?"

In the wrangling that ensued the main topic, and the most important one, was forgotten: Lanky's threat to get a sack of tobacco before the dawn of another day. Red, mumbling to himself at Lanky's stupidity in questioning the usefulness of his efforts in the pass, stalked off with Mesquite's saddle on his shoulder, to borrow Mesquite's horse. He soon rode back past the fire, where Mesquite was slicing thin bits of venison preparatory to jerking them in the smoke; and when he returned on his own horse and joined the pair at the fire the argument was not brought up again.

## CHAPTER XIX

### TH' MAKIN'S

THREE men rode in single file on their way to Broken Wheel, climbing ridges or winding about between them, alert for fresh tracks or other signs of any of the men they wanted. Twilight found them passing through the last deep, wide canyon between them and their destination, and about two hours later they pulled up on the rim of the saucer-shaped valley and looked down at the yellow lights of the town. The night was clear and star-bright, a gentle wind whispering through the brush and sage on the hillside and the bunchgrass in the open.

The middle rider glanced to the right and the left, speaking to his companions.

"I reckon we better ride well around the town, an' not stop till we get on the other side, where they won't be so likely to expect us. We'll give 'em a couple of days to feel safe, an' then come in after dark an' clean up our job in this part of the country."

"Who do you figger will be down there?" asked Red, looking steadily at the faint lights below. He was holding himself in check and agreeing to this waiting policy, while he fairly ached to go down and put matters to the test.

Lanky chuckled, keeping in his mind his determination to get his smoking tobacco; but carefully refraining from giving his companions any inkling of his thoughts.

"Don't know who," he answered before Mesquite could reply; "except that Shanghai *won't* be there. Most likely, if any of 'em are in town, it'll be Buck Eades or Hub Hendricks. However," he said, chuckling softly, "it don't make no difference to us who he is just so he's there. Where are you fellers aimin' to head for now?"

Mesquite shook his head, not being familiar enough with this part of the country to name a place; but Red was not at a loss.

"Right in that little blind canyon where me an' you laid low the day after we got here," he said. "There's some dry firewood under a ledge that I rustled while you was loafin' around lookin' at that split top mountain. It's off the trails an' ain't likely to be visited."

Lanky and Mesquite grunted their assent and the three pushed on along the hill, a score of paces below the rim. The short line strung out, Lanky bringing up the rear, the position he had fallen into naturally as they had swung their horses to ride off in the new direction.

Red's low voice asked a question and Mesquite, who was second in the line, pushed ahead to join the leader and find out what he was talking about; they now were directly opposite the town and neither, being wrapped up in their conversation, noticed that the tail had come off the end of their kite and had deserted. They rode on for another half mile when a vague feeling

of distrust took Red's mind from the conversation and made him check his horse.

"What's the matter?" asked Mesquite in a low voice, his hand resting on a gun butt.

"What's happened to Lanky?" asked Red, suspiciously.

Mesquite choked back a curse and listened. The sighing of the dying wind and the insect noises were all that could be heard. There came no sounds of hoof-falls, no squeaking or creaking of leather, no tinkle or jingle of metal.

Red's words coruscated as he whirled his horse about and pushed down the long, gentle slope toward town. Mesquite's muttered profanity trailed behind him in the blushing air as he raced to overtake his red-haired friend. To them both at the same instant had come the explanation of that guilty silence in the rear: Lanky, like a stubborn moss-head, must have his own way. He was making good his threat and his promise, and would have a sack of tobacco before dawn whether they liked it or not. In their innocence they had named a definite point, the blind canyon; and knowing where he could find them was all that Lanky had needed to let him stop and watch them ride away from him into the night.

Lanky dismounted just outside the town and picketed his horse behind a small ridge covered with sagebrush, where it would be effectually hidden from spying eyes. Making his way slowly toward the thickest of the lights, he kept alert watch on all sides of him, and when he had gained the end of the main street he chose the rear of

the buildings on the east side of it, and slipped from one to the next, examining each in turn through windows or cracks. The faint sounds of his cautious movements were drowned by the noises within, where conversation hummed or laughter roared. The first three buildings were saloons, and each had its group of smoking and drinking men. Next came a general store, where a single kerosene lamp smoked lazily and threw a dim radiance on the ends of boxes and barrels, and picked out of the encircling gloom the high lights of tinware and the curved shoulders of various bottles.

At this window Lanky paused, his gaze resting hypnotically on a small and dirty showcase, in which tobacco in paper and cloth was stacked in neat little piles. There were blue and red and yellow papers of it; and a pile of cloth sacks, each with its small round paper tag, made him wet his lips. In his nostrils lay the scent of tobacco smoke from three saloons. He scouted around a bit and then returned to the window. No one seemed to be abroad in the streets, and he chuckled as he pictured his two friends' vexation when they missed him. He did not know that they were racing down the slope toward town, careless of badger holes or dry-washes.

How was he to get one of those precious sacks without revealing his identity to the proprietor and, perhaps, spreading the news and the warning that one of the Double-Y riders had returned to town? A solution presented itself, and a grin slid across his face. In a moment, masked heavily by his neckerchief, he slipped around to the door—and found it closed and locked.

While he swore in his throat there came a shout of laughter from the dance hall down the street, and Lanky grinned again. What satisfaction would there be in walking in and holding up a lone, harmless storekeeper for tobacco he would pay for? He was glad the store was closed. Going around the rear of the building he hitched up his belt, and paused as his ears caught the sounds of faint and distant hoofbeats somewhere in the darkness west of the town. He knew what those sounds meant—a guilty conscience told him that—and he knew that he would have to work fast.

In the dance hall a raconteur of prairie and range tales was holding forth to the pleasure of himself and his laughing audience.

"There he was, head down in th' mud, an' his feet kickin' like a frog's, an' his cayuse buck-jumpin' acrost the prairie, leavin' him twenty miles to hoof it. I loosed my rope an' dropped the noose over——"

"Stick 'em up, *every*body!" came a snapped order from the rear door, and the instant obedience of the crowd was ludicrous. The speaker's hands went ceilingward as his words stopped and his jaw sagged. Up in the front of the room two men had been sitting close to an open door, where they could get out of sight in a jump; and they moved in a blur of frantic speed as the interruption came, and by the movement called attention to themselves.

In the rear door stood a small, lean man peering over the doubled edge of a soiled handkerchief, in his hand a large and shiny Colt. It swung slowly on a half circle, jabbed at the movement in the front of the room,

and swung back again part way until its muzzle covered the man behind the bar. The newcomer tossed a coin across the room with his free hand, and in a deep and guttural voice made known his wants.

"Couple sacks of smokin' tobacco *damn quick!*" he growled. "Don't nobody move!"

In the little front room two men lowered their guns and chuckled.

"Some gent pacin' a sheriff an' plumb out of the makin's," said the first, breathing a sigh of relief.

"He shore gave me a start, the damn fool!" growled the second, truculently, as he regretfully lowered his weapon. Then he laughed at this utterly ridiculous situation. A roomful of tough men held up by a masked man who wanted smoking tobacco and was paying for it! It might be that he wished to make no more enemies than necessary. Through the big room, as the truth of the situation percolated through various heads, there came a ripple of laughter, and hands showed a tendency to drop.

"Keep 'em up!" snapped the man in the door, trying to keep his sudden exultation out of his voice. "Chuck me that tobacco, an' damn quick! *I* ain't got no time to lose!"

Two sacks sailed through the air, one after the other, and were quickly picked up by the intruder. He snarled a warning against pursuit, backed slowly from the door, slipped aside and was gone, leaving roars of reverberating laughter behind him.

"An' did you see Hub an' Buck bust all records for the standin' broad jump?" shouted a liquor-mellowed

individual through the general noise, arising to point toward the door of the little room. "Come on out, fellers; he's gone!"

"Looked like you was expectin' company, Buck!' yelled an acquaintance near the bar. "Sorta looks like the drinks are on you fellers!"

Buck Eades and Hub Hendricks shuffled shamefacedly back into the big room, their guns dangling at their knees. To hide their embarrassment they wore stern expressions.

"Buy the drinks for this gang of blotters?" asked Hub with a sneer. "Who the hell was yore Santy Claus last time?"

"Anybody that don't like our jumpin' shore can make a fight outa it," said Buck, enraged by the show he had made of himself and by the laughter roaring in his ears. Reassuring words from half-a-dozen mouths somewhat placated him, and he slowly slipped the Colt back into its holster.

"Huh!" sneered Hub, still holding to his weapon. "If we looked funny jumpin' for cover, you shore can figger what this gang out here looked like, stickin' up their hands like jumpin' jacks for a single man!" He glanced around nervously, still humming to the danger note. Lurching awkwardly, he bumped against his companion. "Come on; let's get outa this!" he whispered. "That feller was in a big hurry, an' a posse may be right close!"

Buck nodded and waved his hand to the laughing crowd.

"I'll go see if I can find that modest gent; if I do,

I'll take a sack of smokin' off him, just to show up you fellers."

A quick change in the expressions on the faces of the crowd made him whirl about, to see Lanky Smith, minus the masking neckerchief, filling the front door remarkably well for a man of his slight stature.

"You come here, Hub an' Buck!" he ordered, his gun poised. He was in an agony of fear that his two friends would arrive before he had made the captures single-handed; and when he finished speaking he heard the pounding of swiftly running feet drawing close to the building, and a voice that he knew well.

Hub sprang to one side, his hand streaking up; and went down in a crumpled heap as Lanky's gun roared. And with the roar of the gun a bottle flashed through the air from the side of the room and struck the Double-Y puncher on the shoulder, throwing him off his balance. At this instant Buck, snarling with rage and hatred, jerked out his own gun, fired at the deputy so hastily that he missed, and leaped toward the nearest window. He went through it, taking sash and glass with him, and landed in the arms of a man who joined battle with him joyously. At the rear door appeared a red-haired man with a Winchester in his hands, and his booming voice rang with sincerity. Again hands went up and remained there while anxious eyes watched the finish of this swift tragedy.

At Red's snapped command to the crowd Lanky, his balance recovered, leaped toward that same ruined window and through it, to land beside a struggling, writhing pair on the ground. As he bent over to peer

through the darkness to establish identities a face for an instant turned toward the faint light of the window, and Lanky's arm rose and fell, the impact of the gun butt sounding sweet in his ears. Mesquite untangled himself and stood up, grinning through the grime and blood on his face. He leaped to the window and slanted two guns through it to help the watchful and grim Red keep the crowd under control.

"You're a fool for luck, you grinnin' Flathead!" flung Mesquite over his shoulder.. "An' at last I've taken a prisoner, taken a man alive!"

"Hell you did!" snapped Lanky, pugnaciously. "Who chased him into yore arms an' stunned him?"

There came a joyous shout from the rear door as Red saw Lanky push up beside Mesquite in the window.

"I knowed you'd do it!" yelled Red, grinning from ear to ear. "I knowed you'd get 'em!"

"Yo're a liar!" snapped Lanky as he slid through the window to take a close look at the man he had shot. "You didn't know nothin' of the kind!"

"No more than you did, you lucky fool!" retorted Red, swiftly and easily shifting from false congratulation to earnest abuse. "Get yore makin's?" he asked with a sneer.

"Yes, I got my makin's!" retorted Lanky, triumphantly. "An' what the hell did you get?"

## CHAPTER XX

### DELIVERED IN PERSON

FOUR horsemen pushed up a steeply sloping dry-wash leading from a ravine and stopped, looking at a distant line of darker and fresher greenery which curved across the pale, dusty sage-green of the tumbled range and returned to the horizon whence it came. It was like a great bow, bent to the snapping point, and it marked the course of the Black Jack, the western fork of Jones's Luck River. A little to their left towered the Hog Back, a solitary and enormous butte, and at its base was a short canyon, where the river had worried a way through the rock.

The riders were nearing their home country and were now on its outer edge. Three of them wore quiet smiles because of a long ride nearly finished and a steady responsibility almost at an end. The fourth man wore no smile. On his drawn face was an apathetic frown, his roving gaze was listless, and he had a trick of rubbing his wrists, where faint red lines ran around them. For seven nights his crossed wrists had been bound behind his back, making his sleep fitful and restless; and during his periods of wakefulness he could make out three lariats leading from himself to the three sleeping captors. For him time was drawing to a close;

one more day of riding and he would face a confinement which probably would end in death.

The leader glanced at him, his hand on the lariat leading to the prisoner's horse, and then past him to the smiling pair behind.

"Well, here we are. Who's goin' to take Eades to the ranch?"

Lanky Smith grinned and his companion growled, both regarding the prisoner accusingly.

"Well," sighed Lanky, regretfully, "I reckon it's got to be me, seein' as how I captured him."

Red Connors snorted and exchanged looks with Lanky's scowling companion.

"*You* captured him?" he said, ironically. "You mean you let him dive through the window for the Kid to capture. If it wasn't for Mesquite bein' outside that window he would 'a' got plumb away."

This renewal of a well-chewed bone of contention somehow found Lanky slyly taking another side. He did not defend his laurels as he had all the way from Broken Wheel. If Eades was his prisoner then he would have to leave his companions and take him to the ranch and the sheriff; and knowing that there was plenty of excitement in store for those who rode on, he was not anxious to go to the ranch.

Mesquite Jenkins now took part in the conversation.

"I captured him, but I couldn't 'a' done it so quick if Lanky hadn't dug him out an' chased him into me. Reckon you two hombres better toss up for the job of takin' him in."

"*Us* two?" snapped Red, indignantly. "How the hell are you gettin' *me* into this here job?"

"Us *two?*" snorted Lanky, also indignantly. "Why not us *three?*"

"Because it's my job to round up the gang, an' there's three of 'em still to get," answered Mesquite, his jaw squaring a little.

"That so?" inquired Red in a rising voice. "You know damn well that me an' Lanky had to sneak off to get in on this here hunt, an' that if we go back to the ranch we'll be roped an' watched so cussed close we won't be able to get away ag'in."

Mesquite grinned impudently.

"Mebby that's what I'm figgerin' on," he said. "You hombres plumb invited yoreselves to horn in on *my* game. If either one of you reckon that I'm goin' to drop the chase now, yo're shore reckonin' plumb wrong. I'm stickin' with it till the last of the twelve are either killed or captured. You fellers better toss up for it."

The two self-invited members of a long and exciting man hunt looked at each other jealously.

"Who you starin' at, you carrot-headed coyote?" demanded Lanky with his well-known politeness.

"I'm starin' at you, you runty, cross-eyed tumblebug!" replied Red, not to be outdone in courtesy. "Who the hell did you think I was starin' at?"

"You shore got yore regulation load of gall, figgerin' on tossin' up with *me!*" retorted Lanky. "Yo're the one man present that didn't have nothin' a-tall to do with capturin' this coyote. Looks to me like you was

the one to take him in, an' do somethin' useful. You shore ain't done nothin' useful so far. An' don't you call me no runty tumblebug, or I'll take you apart an' find out what's loose in you!"

"You couldn't take nothin' apart nohow," rejoined Red, whose indignation at this rubbing of an already well-rubbed wound had turned his face a deeper colour than his faded red hair; but before he could continue in what he considered to be the proper language, Mesquite cut into the argument.

"I'll take him in," offered the youth; "but I'll do it on just one condition. You fellers wait for me some'ers an' not go huntin' before I join you."

Unselfishness often aroused in Lanky a latent suspicion, and such a totally unexpected offer started him probing for the reason for it.

"Huh!" he snorted. "I reckon you'll tell 'em that *you* took him prisoner."

"Look here, you damn fool!" snapped Red, glaring at his old-time friend. "The Kid's lettin' us out of it. You naturally don't know enough to recognize a decent act when you see one, bein' a total stranger to everythin' of that kind; but when you start palaverin' about this prisoner bein' yourn, I'm puttin' on my spurs to ride you to a frazzle! What did you ever capture, except mebby a gray-back? You do much more of yore yappin' an' *I'll* take this feller in, even if I has to go with you every step of the way!"

"You an' what else?" snapped Lanky. "You an' the U. S. Army? Huh: you better get 'em all behind you before you try to make me take him in. *You* ride

me to a frazzle! You ain't got no idear how funny you are when you ain't."

"You should oughta quit smokin' *marihuana*," rejoined Red. "First thing you know you'll know a hull lot less than you do now, though I shore can't see how it's possible."

"Toss me that rope, Red," said Mesquite, indicating the lead rope to the prisoner's horse. "You two can fight it out after I get started. Where you figgerin' to wait for me?"

Red scratched his head and stirred up an inspiration. He had to name a place which Mesquite could recognize, since the youth was a stranger to all that country.

"We'll foller the Black Jack towards Big Moose, keepin' on this side of it, till we come to a little basin-shaped canyon where the river turns straight west. There's a nester's cabin in this end of it, the nester hisself havin' long since lit out for parts unknown, an' if you ride straight north from the ranchhouse, headin' for two sharp peaks that make a perfect 'V', you'll stumble on to us. We'll be keepin' a lookout for you."

"You'll wait for me, both of you?" demanded Mesquite, looking them in the eyes.

"*I* will," grunted Red.

"So'll *I*," said Lanky. As an afterthought he added: "How long'll we wait?"

"Till I get there!" snapped Mesquite, taking the rope from Red.

Lanky winked at his red-haired bosom friend and appeared to be a little anxious.

"You reckon you can get that feller there safe, Kid?"

he asked. "Be too bad if he got away now. Mebby me an' Red oughta go most of the way with you."

Mesquite's eyes glinted and he checked the fingers that were making the lariat fast to the pommel of his own saddle. Coiling the rope, he fastened it to the saddle of the prisoner, drew his rifle far enough out of its sheath to assure himself that a cartridge lay in the chamber, and then glanced from the prisoner to the grave-faced doubter.

"For a week, now, you an' Red have taken turns tyin' that lariat to yore saddle horns," he said, smiling coldly. "You reminded me of two old wimmin. You've both let this skunk know you was scared he might get away, an' set him to figgerin' steady on how he might get away. I'm givin' him the rope. His cayuse is as good as mine. He's got near forty miles an' a swimmin' river between him an' the ranch. We ain't got enough proof to hang him or to keep him in jail; but we all know damn well that he was one of them dogs that tried to kill Hopalong. You both was scared he'd try to get away: I'm hopin' he does try." He turned again to the captive. "Lead off, Eades; *pronto*. Any time you think you see a chance to get away, you take it."

Lanky laughed in quiet delight.

"That's the time I got a rise outa you, Kid!"

"Mebby; but you didn't get nowhere near the rise outa me that this murderin' coyote'll get if he makes a break. Go ahead, Eades; an' foller yore own inclinations."

For seven days Eades had spent most of his waking

hours planning how to escape; now that he was face to face with the old Mexican law of the fugitive, he began to plan how to indicate that escape was the very last thing he had in mind. A .45–70 makes an awful mess of a man sometimes.

They pounded down the slope, Eades five lengths in the lead, heading for the river near the Hog Back. At mid-forenoon they crossed the stream, finding it low enough to be comfortably forded, and pounded on again. The shadows were growing long when they rounded the big corral of the Double-Y and stopped before the ranchhouse door. As they swung from the saddle the foreman-sheriff stopped in the kitchen door and looked at them. Mesquite's quick glance was inquiring and hopeful.

"How's Hoppy?" he asked, tensely.

"Go 'round the corner of the house an' see for yoreself," answered Buck Peters, smiling; and then the smile faded and turned to a frown as he eyed the prisoner.

"Hoppy said he figgered you was one of 'em, Eades," he said, stepping forward, a hand resting on the gun at his hip as he saw that the prisoner was not bound. The foreman's other hand came out from under his coat and dangled a pair of handcuffs. "Stick 'em out, Eades; an' remember that I'm only wantin' an excuse."

Mesquite had run around the corner of the building and paused anxiously as he looked at the man seated in a comfortable chair in the full rays of the western sun. The wan face made him blink rapidly and then spring forward.

"Hoppy, you old son-of-a-gun!"

Hopalong turned slowly, looked into the eager, friendly face, and grinned.

"Been thinkin' about you, Kid," he said; "an' wishin' I could be with you. It was a fool thing to do, sendin' you on the trail alone after so many of them fellers, an' in a strange country. When Buck told me Red an' Lanky had gone after you I felt a lot easier. I see you come through all right."

Mesquite shook his head and his grin became a little apologetic.

"But I only got eight of 'em, Hoppy," he admitted. "The rain wiped out all tracks. We figger on gettin' the other three some'ers up around Big Moose. I just brought in Eades, an' turned him over to Buck. He was the only one, so far, that I could take alive. I wanted to bring back more of 'em, Hoppy; but they made me shoot. If it wasn't for Lanky I wouldn't 'a' got Eades." He paused a moment. "Lanky an' Red were a lot of help, an' Lanky went right into a crowded saloon, killed Hendricks, an' chased Eades through a window, plumb into my arms. He's a good man; *both* of 'em are good men."

"They are," replied Hopalong. "There ain't none better, Kid." He was studying the youth, reading the eagerness, anxiety, and warmth on the face which usually was so cold and reserved; and he warmed to the knowledge that this cold, born killer had striven, against his nature, to take captives, and was sorry that he had taken only one. Beyond the edge of the youth's vest

showed one point of a deputy's badge. Hopalong looked directly at it and nodded.

"There's worse things than wearin' a star, Kid," he said. "Takes a big man to live up to it an' not disgrace it. How many of them fellers got away?"

"Three," answered Mesquite. "We'll get 'em. One of 'em is Shanghai." He grinned and frankly gave the devil his due. "He's a wonder. Fooled me time after time; but his rope's gettin' shorter, an' we'll bring him in."

Hopalong laughed.

"Old fox, Shanghai is. Wish I could go after him myself. What you say to lettin' up for a while an' then me an' you go after them three?"

Mesquite's eyes shone, but he shook his head.

"Red an' Lanky are waitin' for me now, up north," he replied. He smiled thinly. "I'm glad I rode in to see for myself; I've been grouchy from worryin' about you. Pretty near the hardest thing I ever did was to bring Eades in. I gave him all kinds of chances for near forty miles to make a break for it; but he rode plumb careful."

"Shouldn't wonder," grunted Hopalong. He pulled his coat around him, glanced at the sun, and then stood up. It was September now, and the faint wind blowing from the northwest had an edge to it at that hour and altitude. Mesquite held out an arm, but the older man ignored it and moved toward the corner. As they were about to make the turn they found the foreman waiting for them. Behind him, seated on the ground with his

back against the wall of the house, was Eades with his handcuffed hands fastened to his manacled ankles.

"Where's Red an' Lanky?" demanded the foreman of Mesquite.

Mesquite's arm described a half circle which began in the west and ended in the east, taking in three points of the compass.

"Up there," he said.

Buck grunted and pulled thoughtfully at his moustache. His face was stern, but a twinkle momentarily lighted his eyes.

"Much obliged for the information," he growled. "You tell 'em to come back here an' go to work. The cattle are scatterin' hell-to-gone off the range."

"But it don't matter very much where they scatter to *now*, does it?" inquired Mesquite. "I never was much of a hand to carry messages: my mem'ry's awful poor. I ain't aimin' to strain it. You better tell 'em when you see 'em."

"What I'll tell 'em when I see 'em won't take no mem'ry a-tall to remember," growled the foreman. He glanced at Hopalong and they exchanged the twitch of an eyelid. "Suppose you can remember anythin' a-tall about what you been doin' the last month?" Buck asked the youth. "How many of them thieves you caught? How you come to catch 'em, an' anythin' else that might be interestin'?"

Mesquite shook his head.

"Ain't got time to try to remember," he answered. "I got to get three more: Tom Short, Foxy Joe, an' Shanghai." On the last name his tongue seemed to

linger with a relish, as though reluctant to have done with it.

"Oh, Shanghai, huh?" remarked Buck, a grin flickering across his face. "Well, well, Kid. If yo're goin' trailin' him I reckon mebby that you'll have a-plenty time to rec'lect most all the de-tails of yore whole life before you bring him in for me to snap the cuffs on. If I was a gamblin' man," he said, loudly, glancing around to see if this declaration of uprightness had enriched the ears of his wife, "I'd risk a couple pesos, Mex, that you won't get within gunshot of him."

"Far be it from me to tempt you to gamble, Buck," spoke up Hopalong, his hand going over his mouth to hide his grin, "or to coax you from the straight an' narrer, *an'* thorny; *but,*" he looked around to see if Rose Peters was in sight, "I'll bet you a cool hundred, U. S., that the Kid not only gets in gunshot of that ol' coyote, but brings him in alive."

Buck chuckled, touched his chest with the tip of his extended right thumb, the back of his hand outward and to the left; then he pushed both hands out in front of him, moved them in a gesture which suggested the building of small heaps, and brought them back to his body, fingers extended, in a scooping motion. Then, to make assurance doubly sure, he nodded briskly.

Hopalong laughed softly and nudged the youth, instinctively making the sign for "good."

"I'm backin' you, Kid; an' not worryin' about it," he said, moving slowly along the wall toward Mesquite's horse.

"I can't reach them two to-night," said the youth,

climbing into the saddle, "but I can get some supplies, cover a lot of miles, an' roll up in my blanket some'ers." He rested his hand lightly on Hopalong's shoulder, nodded to the foreman, and whirled his mount to ride to the bunkhouse and its kitchen. The little cloud of dust swirled around Hopalong and he stepped back to get out of it, his hand going up in a parting salute.

"Take good care of Red an' Lanky, Kid," he called after the departing horseman, his face a network of humorous wrinkles.

Buck snorted.

"'Take good care of Red an' Lanky!'" he repeated in heavy sarcasm. "*Huh!*" Then he turned to look down at the prisoner seated against the house. "I'll take you to town in the mornin'."

Eades sneered.

"Don't give a damn where or when you take me," he retorted. "You can't pin a thing on me; not a thing."

Buck scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Mebby so; mebby so," he grunted. "An' then, ag'in, mebby not. Some of yore friends have been right talkative, Eades; right talkative." He paused a moment and pulled at his moustache. "When I take you to town I'm countin' on takin' all the boys along. There's been quite a lot of loose talk goin' on, an' in a cow country most folks carry ropes at their pommels. To some folks ambushes are like lightnin': nobody knows where they're goin' to strike next; an' you'd be surprised at how many friends Hoppy has. That was one thing that was worryin' me when I told Mesquite

to send back Red an' Lanky. If Hoppy was well enough to ride, I'd shore feel a lot better. Mebby we oughta keep you right here for awhile."

Eades's face was pale and his defiance was gone. He looked pleadingly from Buck to Hopalong, and let his gaze rest on the man he had tried to kill from ambush.

The sunken eyes of the convalescent blazed for an instant and then became calm and reassuring.

"I can't ride," he said; "but I shore can lay on a bench an' shoot through a window. We better keep him up here, Buck, where it's safer," and the speaker made his way to the door, through it and into the house.

"There goes the man you tried to murder!" snapped Buck, fumbling in his pocket for a small key. "Tell you one thing: if the jury lets you off, you want to get outa this country as fast as you can, an' not come back. If I wasn't sheriff I'd——" He finished in a rumble low down in his throat and helped the prisoner to his feet, to start toward the bunkhouse. As they covered the first few yards they saw Mesquite Jenkins bolt from the open door, throw a heavy sack across the saddle, mount and ride off. "There goes a kid that ain't got the habit of wearin' a deputy's badge," growled the foreman. "I'm surprised he took you alive. Yessir, Eades; if you get off free, I'd bust all records for distant parts if I was you."

Eades said nothing, but he was doing a lot of thinking.

Apparently Red and Lanky needed no one to look after them, if the tempting odour of the campfire meant

anything. They were just pouring the coffee when Red glanced behind him, stood erect, and swung his sombrero over his head. He stepped to the duffle roll and took up a third tin cup. Down at the lower end of the valley a horseman, waving in reply, turned slightly from his course and came on at a lope. In a few minutes he dismounted near the fire, sniffing eagerly.

"How's Hoppy?" asked Red, trying to speak casually.

Lanky was rigid from suspense as he waited for the answer.

"Comin' along fine!" exulted Mesquite. He stripped off his saddle, briskly rubbed the horse's back, and then hung the saddle blanket on a bush where the heat of the fire would dry it. "Buck was askin' for you fellers," he said with a grin.

"I betcha," grunted Lanky, He looked up, wiping tears from his eyes and drew his head out of the smoke of the frizzling bacon. "Get there all right with Eades?" he asked with elaborate carelessness.

Mesquite's face hardened at this veiled insinuation, and then softened a little; but he was looking at the questioner in a way which many men might have found disturbing.

"Yes, *both* of us, if that's what you mean," he retorted.

Lanky sighed and turned the bacon over, punching it carefully to remove the arches and to force it to lie flat.

"Hoped he might 'a' gambled with you," he said. "Here, hold yore tin over: think I'm goin' to get up an' tote it to you?"

Red knocked an inquisitive spider from the brim of his sombrero and appeared to be in a rare good humour. He glanced at the stiff figure standing over Lanky and chuckled.

"Betcha Buck said the cows was gettin' scattered an' lost, an' that he was plumb short of help," he suggested, his eyes twinkling. "Hold on, Kid!" he interjected hurriedly as Mesquite was about to speak. "'Tain't a-tall necessary to repeat what he said. We know it by heart. An', also, we're goin' back to the ranch; but we're goin' sorta roundabout."

"Yeah," grunted Lanky. "Sorta roundabout. D'ja bring any sugar, Kid?"

Before mid-forenoon they were riding on again, discussing what they had to do, and planning their campaign. Both Red and Lanky were fairly well familiar with the country around Big Moose, one of the home ranges of old Shanghai; and because their youthful companion knew nothing at all about it, and because it was easier to post him about the town, they suggested that they take to the open country and leave the town to him. They also suggested that since communication would be impossible, it would be wise to operate independently of one another. To both of these suggestions Mesquite assented, particularly the latter, and he drew rein to let his companions ride on after they had told him what they could about the town. Watching them for a moment he turned up a little valley, heading for a clump of trees and brush, there to kill time and to wait for evening, when he would pay the town a visit.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A GIFT OF THE DARK

AT ONE time Big Moose had been a relay station for a stagecoach mail service and a point of supply for many freighting outfits. In its best days it had been hectic, a turbulent meeting place for teamsters, soldiers, buffalo hunters, scouts, gamblers, and worse. The second piano to be freighted into that section of the country had been unloaded here, and with the arrival of a billiard table Big Moose had become boastful. A grass-grown trail, scored deeply by wide iron tires, led ramblingly down from the northeast, following the line of least resistance from the banks of the upper Missouri to a one-time string of army posts. There had been times during the periods of low water when the steamboats could ascend no higher, and had been forced to tie up to the south bank and to entrust their fright to wagons.

Life had flared high in Big Moose, and the town had not been silent either day or night; but now it was a relic, stubbornly refusing to die. It also was a rallying place for certain undesirables, who felt thoroughly at home when under its few remaining roofs, and who knew that every man in town was in sympathy with them and might be expected to give what aid they could.

To this decrepit marker of grass-grown roads came Tom Short and Foxy Joe one dark night. A door had opened and shut again, and the curious inmates of the lighted room had grinned knowingly and silently made them welcome; but the welcome was tinged with reserve. Tom and Joe, well known to all, were welcome enough; but in this instance they might have had the consideration to postpone their visit. An uncomfortable feeling was astir: what might be following along their trail?

The careless and rambling conversations in the room had become stilled at the entry of the fugitive pair, as though marking time and waiting for information to check up on the rumours which had trickled into town during the last few weeks. It was known in Big Moose that the carefully planned raid on the herds of the Double-Y had misfired; that Lefty Trotter and Slim Porter had been killed, and that a dozen friends of both these men had been rounded up in Twin River by a youth hardly out of his teens and had been thrown into jail. It was known that another dozen, the best men in Porter's gang, had fled from the country after making a bungling attempt to kill Hopalong Cassidy from ambush, and that the same beardless youth had gone in hot pursuit of them. Later rumours claimed that Red Connors and Lanky Smith had left the ranch and had ridden to join him, and that the Double-Y range was being patrolled by mounted riflemen. It was also known that the action had flowed swiftly eastward, away from country near to Big Moose, much to the quiet satisfaction of the town. Day had followed day and lulled the threat of danger; but now, with these two

fugitives coming in the night and seeking aid and sanctuary, the threat was growing.

The habitués of Big Moose were lending anxious ears to what these two men might have to say; and generously buying them liquor to serve as props for their wavering courage. They had been tortured by going a fortnight without liquor, and now they gulped the raw whisky so bounteously provided, their burning thirst making them careless and oblivious to the reasons for the generosity. While they drank and expanded under the warmth of the spirits, their companions and hosts had drawn chairs closer to them until the circle was tight and complete, waiting for the liquor to unlock the doors of secretiveness and let out the garrulous truth. The wait was not in vain, for slowly the newcomers had lost their air of fear and distrust; they grew genial and a little boastful; and they began to hint darkly against Shanghai, accusing him of treachery. Steadily the indictments against this absent person grew, steadily they were becoming facts through the sheer impetus of repetition; and the few lukewarm adherents of the old man, who had taken his part earlier in the discussion, now fell away from him and added their voices against him.

Neither of the fugitives could tell much of what had happened over in the Broken Wheel country after the moment when their gang had separated and each man had struck out for himself; but there had been certain meetings agreed upon and their friends had not kept them; but of one thing they spoke with emphasis: Mesquite Jenkins and his two companions might have

come up straight from hell, for if they were not three devils, they at least had had the devil's aid; and the former had no more mercy in his heart than might be found in the heart of a mad wolf.

For a few days and nights Tom Short and Foxy Joe had kept under cover, emerging only after dark. To men keyed up to face a deadly pursuing danger this harmless interlude brought relief and a growing sense of security. Both the fugitives had dwelt with warm self-congratulation upon the smashing rainstorm which had raged in the Broken Wheel country and had turned each dry-wash and arroyo into spouting torrents; they had described in glee how they had ridden, sometimes for miles, in rushing water often over the fetlocks of their animals; how they had picked the shallower streams and kept to the rain-scoured slopes of the divides. This they actually had done with cunning foresight, and they knew that so far as trailing was concerned they had nothing to fear. Gradually they became less furtive, and it was not long before they began to move about in daylight. Some difference arose between them, perhaps in the manner of dealing a hand at poker, and they separated, each choosing a different crowd for his companions.

The fifth night had settled down upon the town when Shanghai rode in for provisions and a taste of liquor, and tied his horse with a jerk knot to a post behind a deserted shack and made his way cautiously on foot to a grimy window of the main saloon. He had no faith in the security of Big Moose, not trusting any of its inhabitants, and he did not intend to tarry for long.

He would have passed around it but for the fact that he needed flour and beans and bacon before riding on to hole up in his haven in the hills. He, too, had ridden for miles in the rushing storm water of that rainstorm; he, too, had been careful to leave no trail, and he feared no trailing; but Shanghai had a vivid imagination and hard common sense, and he knew that no Double-Y rider need give any thought to trails to be tempted to pay a visit to Big Moose. Gaining the side of the shack he found its drawn curtains baffling sight, but the walls were far from being soundproof, and it was not long before his ears told him that it was safe to enter.

The door opened and shut, and Shanghai stood inside the room, blinking a little in the light. His entry was marked by silence, and then here and there a reserved voice sourly acknowledged his greetings. In one corner of the room Foxy Joe sat scowling at him, a half-filled glass in his hand; in another, Tom Short stopped dealing for a moment while he looked at the newcomer, and then went on again, the cards falling slowly before the players.

Shanghai sensed hostility and determined to get his drink and to clear out before matters came to a crisis. He would hasten on to the general store, lay in his supplies, and leave town as soon as possible. Lifting the whisky glass on a level with his eyes, he admired the colour of the liquid and then tossed it down. As he put the glass on the bar he started and stiffened at the epithet hurled at him. Turning slowly he saw Tom Short standing erect, hand on gun, and glowering at him.

"Git out of town, an' stay out, you —— ——!"

Shanghai shook his head, indicating sorrow.

"That ain't no way fer a friend ter talk, Tom," he said. "We're companions in mis'ry an' danger, an' we come through a tight place. We oughter stand by each other, an' not go ter callin' names. Bein' friendly ter ye, I'm advisin' ye ter do the same as me: ride away from Big Moose, an' ride sudden."

"Stand by each other!" sneered Tom, his eyes glinting. "Where's them that trusted you?'

"Why, they all rode south together," lied Shanghai, knowing that no man present knew of the death of Arizona Frank or the others. "They started fer Jackson's Hole, roundabout, to lay low till next spring. There was Bill Hoskins, Arizony Frank, Chick Cole, an' Hub Hendricks," he said, gravely calling the roll of the dead. "I told 'em ter head fer Brown's Hole, over on Green River, but they held out fer Jackson's. I'm on my way ter Brown's right now." He was lying with the facility of long practice and putting the ring of truth into every word. With this show of hostility on the part of Tom Short and the others he was not giving them any information about his plans that might make trouble for him. "You an' Joe better pull stakes: there ain't no tellin' who'll come up this way, a-lookin' fer all of us."

At the calm naming of the four fugitives supposed to be riding toward the safety of Jackson's Hole, Tom Short found the props knocked from under his budding pugnacity; but he tried again, on an accusation he knew something about.

"What happened to you an' Bill Hoskins when you was supposed to lay a trail for them bloodhounds into our ambush?" he demanded, his fingers curling around the handle of his gun.

Shanghai weighed the words and read the eyes of the man who spoke them, and he knew that he stood face to face with death at the hands of a man whose rage was fed with liquor. He controlled his expression and appeared to be surprised by his friend's ignorance.

"Why, don't you know what happened?" he asked, incredulously. "Don't you know that them three Double-Y hounds got between us an' you boys, an' chased us fer three days before we could throw 'em off? There warn't a minute of all that time that me an' Bill wasn't wishin' we could lead 'em inter an ambush. They kept us hoppin' lively, only a couple of jumps ahead of 'em."

"I reckon yo're lyin', you —— ——," growled Tom in distressing indecision; but he let loose of the gun. "If I knowed you was I'd blow you all over this here room; an' not bein' shore that you ain't lyin', I'm tellin' you to git out, hot foot, an' stay out! Savvy?"

"I never suspicioned you'd treat me this way," mourned Shanghai, seething with helpless rage and the desire for vengeance, but hiding his feelings under an unctuous exterior. He shook his head sorrowfully and slowly started toward the door. "Well, I ain't holdin' no hard feelin's," he lied. "Good luck, boys," and the closing door put him into the night.

As the door shut behind him the old man swiftly

changed. The feeling of danger which had almost suffocated him in the smoke-filled room still shivered along his spine. His reaction was not of relief, but of revenge, and he hurried to the store to obtain the needed supplies and get out of this unexpected danger zone. In a few minutes he had made his purchases, tied them securely in a gunny sack, grabbed it by the middle and shook it until half of its contents lay in each end. Throwing the sack across the saddle, he made it fast to the pommel and rode off into the night, turning once in his seat to shake a vengeful fist at the pale yellow lights of the saloon. Then he pulled up suddenly to listen. The sounds of a horse walking over rock came faintly down the trail, and the old man rode into a clump of brush to see who was coming. Dismounting, he quickly picketed the horse to a stump and then slipped back to the edge of the road.

The unknown horseman passed close by in the dark, his identity hidden from the peering eyes of the old watcher. Going on until within a few hundred yards of the peaceful town, and closely followed by Shanghai on foot, the stranger dismounted, fastened his horse, and slipped forward on foot. Passing between a lighted window and Shanghai, the stranger revealed himself to the old man as crouching and facing the buildings; and in a flash Shanghai knew him. It was Mesquite Jenkins, the most deadly of the persistent three. For an instant the old man's rifle pressed against his shoulder, and then lowered. The target was too vague to offer a safe shot; and with this reluctant admission, the

old man had an inspiration. In that saloon were enemies of them both; why not let both sides fight it out while he got away?

Mesquite moved steadily forward, in each hand a gun, careful not to step on twigs or chips, and keeping as close to the few intervening buildings as he could. Time was of no importance. He wanted only to give the inmates of that saloon no warning of his presence until he could open the door and get them all under his guns. The sounds coming from the building reassured him, for above the ordinary noises of such convivial gatherings there boomed loud and boisterous laughter.

He came to the end of the last intervening house, and started to cross the open on a run, not knowing that a swiftly moving shape had passed around him in the dark and had gained the rear of the saloon. But he soon was to learn that something was wrong. He had taken but a few steps across the open when there sounded the sudden noise of stampeding horses, several quick shots, the tinkle of a cracked window pane driven inward by a bullet, and an instant answering turmoil inside the building. He did not know that Shanghai had done this and was escaping back the way he had come, to get to his horse and ride toward his hang-out in the hills while the town surged with action; he did not know that, but he did know that the lights went out suddenly and that flashing rapiers of fire spurted from the saloon. The black night was full of screams and whines around him, and once his sombrero tugged sharply at his head.

To turn back was as dangerous as to go forward, and

more distasteful; he dashed at an angle for a flanking building, gained the shelter of its wall and threw himself down against it. Getting his breath and trying to solve this puzzle, he lay there for a moment; and then wondered at the rush of pounding feet and the shouts of rage in the rear of the abandoned saloon, where its panicky inmates, fearful of an attack in force from the Double-Y outfit, streamed out to find their horses and to escape in the dark. The horses were gone, only cleanly cut halter ropes and straps telling that they had been there. The sounds of running died swiftly as the horseless fugitives scurried into the dark, and silence hung over the town. Mesquite waited, hoping that time would reassure the habitués of the saloon and tempt them back to light the lamps and laugh at their panic.

An hour passed, and then footsteps sounded faintly, coming up the street. They were cautious steps, and slow. Close to him in the dark there passed a moving blot, hardly discernible. A door opened slowly and after a few minutes there came the faint glow of a match.

"Shanghai, shore as hell," growled the bartender, placing the lamp chimney over the flame. He, being guiltless of rustling cattle, could show himself like an honest man. He lit the other two lamps and then looked around the room, chuckling at the overturned chairs and tables, where his genial companions had leaped into galvanic action. Grinning ironically, he glanced from one open door to the other and stepped toward the rear entrance.

"Hey!" he shouted into the night, all his lung power

in the word. "Hey! Come out! Come out, you damn fools! It was only Shanghai, gettin' square; an' I'm admittin' he done it."

Here and there sounded slight rustlings, gentle creakings, and after a moment was heard a snicker of amusement or a snort of rage. Stragglers appeared from numerous hiding places and loafed carelessly back toward the cheer of the lighted saloon. By ones and twos they entered its open doors, humorously jeering one another, and whole-heartedly cursing the old reprobate who had caused it all and driven off their horses. Tom Short loomed up in the faint path of light streaming from the rear door and swaggered through the opening, cursing steadily, his words a stream of threats. Half an hour passed in careless hilarity and the bar did a rushing business before Foxy Joe was missed, and then a shout went up that shook the roof.

"Joe's still scared!" shouted a drunken cow-skinner. He reeled to the door and sent his voice booming through the night, profanely inviting Joe to join them.

Tom Short stepped to his side and added his jeers to those of the cow-skinner, and then turned with half-drunken assurance and explained Joe's absence.

"He's layin' low in Smithers's shack," he laughed. "What you say me an' you go an' dig him out, an' make him buy a round of drinks to square hisself?"

"I'm with ye, Tom," bellowed the cow-skinner, who was always in hearty favour of someone else buying a round of drinks. He resoundingly slapped his companion on the shoulder. "Lead the way, an' we'll go git him."

Hilarious endorsement from the others sent them off in high glee, straight for Smithers's shack, and after them, silent as a stalking wolf, crept Mesquite Jenkins from his place at the base of the wall, vainly trying to determine which of the pair was the man he wanted. They separated when near the shack named, and took it by assault from front and rear. A hasty search showed them that it was empty of all human beings except themselves, and they argued this fact with drunken solemnity.

"Hell!" snorted Tom Short. "Joe's near as scary as ol' Shanghai, damn his eyes. He's streakin' it inter the hills afoot an' won't come back till hunger makes him. I should 'a' knowed that, for I've been his partner for more'n a dozen years. Let's go back: I want another drink."

The cow-skinner was in hectic need of the same thing, and they locked arms and went through the low doorway singing inharmoniously. As they stepped from the building something leaped from behind the nearest corner. There was a flurry of action, the swift thudding of heavy blows, and the two thirsty pilgrims lay side by side on the ground, blissfully unconscious of current events.

A match flared, shielded by closely cupped hands, and cast a brief glow on each stupid face, and then winked out. There came sounds of dragging, which grew fainter beyond the end wall of the shack. Then silence. After a few minutes the cow-skinner stirred, rolled over and groped about. His senses slowly returning to their previous state of partial befuddlement,

he arose on his knees and then to his feet, and reeled and stumbled back to the saloon, both hands holding his aching jaw; and as the effects of the blow wore off he began to curse the treachery of Tom Short, who had knocked him down and fled.

Tom Short was not fleeing; he was being carried, as yet unconscious of the growing lump on his head where the butt of a heavy Colt had caressed him. When he came to his senses he found himself lying on the ground, tied hand and foot; and as he stirred and struggled a crisp, low voice told him things.

"Get yoreself together," came the order out of the darkness. "If you don't get so you can ride double, an' right soon, I'll leave you lyin' up here for the carrion crows to feast off of." Bits of information from the unseen captor, added to his own returning knowledge, gradually made things clear to the captive, and he chose the lesser of two evils. When dawn sifted down over the land it found two men riding on one horse and heading straight for the ranchhouses of the Double-Y, not many miles distant. When the low buildings of the ranch came in sight over a ridge, the smiling wearer of a deputy sheriff's badge stated an obvious fact.

"Hoppy an' Buck shore will be glad to see you, you coyote."

The fact was so obvious that the sullen and aching captive squirmed in his bonds but made no reply.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE CONVALESCENT

HOPALONG had spent so much time in bed the last few weeks that he welcomed the dawn, and usually was the first person up and dressed, which involved him in numerous and almost unending arguments with Buck and Rose, especially the latter. It seemed to Hopalong that he had, in her mind, slipped back into the infant class, to be coddled with easy chairs and pillows, and watched entirely too closely. It was becoming downright irksome, and more than once an edge had grown on his temper which he had been hard put to it to conceal. He could swear at Buck, but he could not swear at Rose, and not for worlds would he have offended her or hurt her feelings; but when the day came that found him leaving her ministering care to go back to the bunkhouse to gamble and squabble with the boys he would be grateful beyond words.

He rubbed his eyes, pushed the blanket downward with energetic feet, and slowly sat up, pivoting to let his legs slide over the edge of the bed. The cold floor felt good, and the early morning air had just enough tang in it to make him dress with a degree of haste. A glance out of the window, craning his neck to peer

up past the eaves, told him that the day would be clear and bright. Holding his boots in a hand, he walked softly to the door, opened it a little, and listened. Buck was beginning to stir.

Reaching the kitchen, Hopalong pulled on his boots and lifted a lid of the stove. The ashes had not been dumped, which meant that Rose had left to Buck the nightly task of loading the stove for breakfast use. It took only a few minutes to clean the firebox and build up a scientific blaze. Scientific blazes were a hobby with Hopalong. Buck, despite all the wordy instructions wasted on him, still persisted in throwing in big chunks of wood, and then standing on one foot and hoping that the match would take; and when Hopalong built the fire, Buck stood on one foot and growled with impatience. First there must be a criss-crossed layer of very fine shavings; then a criss-crossed layer of heavier shavings, with the wood of each succeeding layer increasing proportionately in thickness. It was a fine art, not to be slighted; and never did such a scientific foundation betray the trust placed in it. The touch of a match sent a roaring through the stove and by the time one could go to the wood box and return, even the top layer was blazing.

Hopalong had just struck the match when the floor boards of the dining room creaked protestingly, and Buck stuck his head in at the door. He blinked, yawned, and rubbed his eyes. Then he fixed them on the stove.

"I could 'a' had two fires goin' by this time," he remarked with before-breakfast frankness.

"You shore could—if they both didn't go out," replied Hopalong, bending before the bottom of the grate. There sounded a brisk crackling, a tentative hiss, and a growing roar. Little puffs of blue smoke shot through the chinks between lids and stove top, and then the warmed chimney tried to suck stove and all up through the roof. Hopalong stood erect. "I might 'a' had two fires goin' by this time, or mebby three, if you'd raked out the ashes last night an' got things ready."

Buck lifted his head from his dripping hands, blew resoundingly, and groped for the towel.

"Huh!" he said. Then he moved toward the slab of bacon and picked up a knife.

"Get away from that smoked hawg!" said Hopalong, grabbing the slab. "You cut bacon like you oughta cut steak, an' cut steak like you oughta cut bacon. Get a bucket of water if you've got to do somethin'."

"Gettin' well right fast, ain't you?" demanded Buck. He spread his feet, jammed his knuckles against his hips, and stared with frank directness at his companion. "Gettin' right back into yore old form, ain't you? Reckon everbody oughta like their bacon all dried out, don't you? Shore; I'll get a bucket of water, an' for a couple of pesos, Mex, I'll heave it all over you!"

"You ain't goin' to get nothin' for nobody," retorted Hopalong, dispensing with the bacon slab. He reached for the bucket and opened the door at the same time; and then turned his head and grinned at Rose Peters as she entered the kitchen.

"That's right, Hopalong; if it is not too heavy for

you," said Rose, eyeing the bucket dubiously. "Buck, the wood box is empty. I'll have breakfast ready soon."

"Come on, Blear-eye," said Hopalong, grabbing Buck's belt. "Get some wood. You'll warm up an' get near human when you see that sun."

Buck shuffled after his old friend, blinked at the rising sun, and grunted.

"You gimme that bucket," he ordered, grabbing one side of the pail. "You ain't got no business drawin water till you get plumb well."

Hopalong bridled and closed his grip on the other side of the handle. Then he yanked. Caught momentarily off balance, Buck went sideways, lost his grip, recovered his poise, and looked with disgust at the bucket swinging in his friend's hand.

"You shouldn't do that, Hoppy," he chided. "A sudden strain like that might open up them wounds, an' put you on yore back again."

Hopalong took a quick step forward and shoved his face within a few inches of his foreman's.

"I'm gettin' damn sick of bein' pampered like a sick pup!" he hissed. "Them wounds won't open up ag'in if I strained 'em enough to put *you* on *yore* back! An' if you reckon I'm still an invalid, you just grab holt of me: that's all, just grab holt!"

"Now, now, now!" reproved the foreman, earnestly. "You've been an awful sick man, Hoppy!"

"An' I'll never hear the end of it, neither, I reckon," growled the other. "Go get that firewood an' let me alone."

He had been a sick man, hovering on the edge of the

Great Divide, with only his steel constitution and cast-iron stubbornness to save him. Shot full of holes, he had lost an almost fatal amount of blood; but by some miracle past understanding the wounds had not been infected; he had been given the best medical treatment and nursing that it was possible to get, and he had pulled through by an eyelash. Rest, sunlight, fresh air, and plenty of nourishing food had done their work. Every day that passed now found him making surprising strides toward his old-time fitness. He almost could feel the strength return, and the last week had tempted him to perform grave indiscretions from the sheer pride of energy, and the fact that they had done him no harm was the best proof of his condition. Like most men unaccustomed to disability, he had an ingrained contempt for weakness if the weakness was his own.

Breakfast was over, Rose was clearing up the kitchen, Buck pawing around in the drawers of the old-fashioned walnut desk for the account book, and Hopalong lounged in the kitchen door gravely smoking an odorous corncob pipe, a gift from an admirer in the South. He was watching a piebald chunk of equine meanness in the breaking corral, a horse that as yet had not been ridden, despite the several attempts to that end. He wondered how he could arrange things so that he could slip down there and show the piebald that it had an entirely unwarranted idea of its own cussedness. It would have to be done when no one was looking, or the protesting squawks would be heard all the way to Twin River.

"Now what you think to do?" inquired Rose, glancing out of the window and following his gaze before he could shift it. She saw the piebald and had heard Buck's high-pressure opinion of it, so she did not connect it with Hopalong's thoughts; why should she connect it, when such a thing as breaking a reputed man-killer was the very last idea that should find a warm welcome in that red head? Besides, Rose had always credited him with having a lot of first-class, uncommon sense.

"Oh, he's figgerin' on bull-doggin' a couple of steers," growled Buck from the front room, "or mebby bustin' that lop-eyed, man-killin' pet of Skinny's," he added as an overwhelming broadside, not for a moment realizing that he had hit the nail on the head. "Where in hell is that account book?"

Hopalong stiffened a little at Buck's lucky shot in the dark and glanced at Rose.

"Ah-h!" she whispered, her eyes wide open in amazement. She shook her head fiercely and calmly replied to her peeved husband: "You put the book on the top of the desk so you could find it again," she said, and turned to Hopalong. "You mus' not do that!" she whispered.

Hopalong relaxed and laughed at Buck's growls; and then leaned forward to peer intently at a moving dot far off on the north range, oblivious of Buck's little ironies. For nearly half a minute he studied this dot, and then turned lazily in the door.

"Hey, Buck! Betcha the cigars that the Kid brings in another prisoner before night."

"There ain't no doubt a-tall *now*," retorted Buck,

"that yo're yore own self again. Rose, he's shore well; an' bein' sick didn't do him no good a-tall. Yo're just as *loco* as ever, you Siwash!"

"After the last couple of weeks with you, mebby I'm a little locoer; but there's somebody comin' across our north section that rides like Mesquite, only he's too big. I'm bettin' it's him, an' somebody else, ridin' double."

"An' I'm bettin' you got some more of them hallucerations that Tex said you had once before," growled Buck; but he was stepping briskly toward the door. "Hum! Looks like him; an' then, ag'in, it don't."

Down at the bunkhouse Skinny Thompson stepped out of the door and looked idly around. For a moment he gazed steadily at the distant newcomers and then glanced at the ranchhouse. Seeing Hopalong and Buck in the kitchen door, he ambled toward them, a grin on his freckled face.

"Here comes yore pet bobcat, Hoppy," he called. "Looks like he's draggin' somethin' home with him."

"We'll know who it is when it gets a little closer," replied Buck.

"Closer?" repeated Skinny. "What's the matter with yore eyes? Goin' blind? That's Mesquite, Mesquite's cayuse, an' I'm gamblin' that the other feller is Tom Short."

"When you figger on bustin' that piebald, Skinny?" carelessly asked Hopalong.

"Just as soon as my breakfast sets good," answered Skinny. "I lost me a breakfast once by bein' in a hurry to bust a mean cayuse," he explained.

They talked idly while they watched the double riders approach, and it was not long before there remained no question about their identities. When Mesquite passed the corral he carelessly raised a hand in salutation, and in a few minutes more pulled up near the kitchen door. The man with him let loose of the cantle and slid gratefully to the ground, sighing with relief as he arranged his wrists to lie more comfortably in the rope which bound them, and all the time remained sullenly silent, scowling at the little group. No one paid any attention to him.

"What did you do with Red an' Lanky?" asked Buck with great interest as Mesquite dismounted. "Did you tell 'em what I said?"

Mesquite smiled.

"Forgot all about it, like I warned you I might. I reckoned they figgered that Shanghai and his friends would think the town was too dangerous, and take to the hills to hide out till things got quiet," he said. "They suggested that they take the open country around Big Moose, an' that I take the town. Said they knowed all that country right well, an that I didn't, an' that I could learn the town a lot quicker than I could learn the hills." He chuckled. "Suited me, plumb centre. I wanted to hunt by myself. They rode north an' I rode west; an' *this* is what I grabbed in the dark the very first night I struck the town."

All eyes now turned to the prisoner, who was uneasily watching Hopalong, the man he had tried to murder.

Buck looked at the man with little interest.

"I got a friend of yourn picketed in an' old shack,

with Pete Wilson settin' in front of the door," said the foreman. "We don't dare take him to town for fear he'll be lynched some dark night. Come over here so I can take them cuttin' ropes off yore wrists an' put on somethin' that'll be more comfortable."

Skinny forgot himself and stood erect, and bumped his head against the eaves of the house. He stepped from the wall, took off his hat and punched the crown back to its full height.

"Pete is a one-track man," he observed, wrinkles of amusement playing on his leathery face. "You tell Pete a thing an' he forgets everythin' else. Buck told him that there was nine big buckshot in each barrel of that scatter gun, an' that if he didn't set right close to the door some of 'em would scatter so wide they'd mebby miss his man when he fired. He is to pull the trigger at the first suspicious move. When Pete got the hang of Buck's remarks he moved up close to the door, so he wouldn't waste no lead a-tall. Pete thinks a hell of a lot of Hoppy; an' he feels kinda put out that we wouldn't let him go off gunnin' for you an' the rest of yore gang." He paused a moment to let his remarks sink in, and his voice hardened a little when he continued: "Yo're goin' in that shack. You an' Eades will be chained together. Unless you want to collect a couple loads of buckshot at about a dozen feet, you'll set damn still. Fur's I'm concerned, I shore hope both of you make a break."

Buck instinctively tried the handcuffs, found them securely locked, and stepped back, waving his hand. Skinny glanced upward, found that he was clear of the

eaves, and stood erect again. He waved a hand toward the bunkhouse.

"Step right along, Short; Pete'll be tickled near to death to see you." Having started his prisoner in the general direction of the waiting and cold-eyed Pete, Skinny paused and turned. "Kid, you got 'em comin' rapid. I snickered at you the night you started out; but I'm eatin' humble pie now. You can count on me any time you need me; an' I'll give you my brand-new mouth-organ if you blank Red and Lanky on this man huntin'." He gently scratched his head and swung around to follow the shuffling prisoner. "Yes, sir; if Red an' Lanky manage to capture one of them coyotes they'll get so swelled up that there just won't be no livin' with 'em."

The three friends watched him go, and talked idly for a few minutes. Then Buck remembered the account book and the entries he had to make, and went in the house. Hopalong, his eyes fixed hungrily on the mean piebald in the corral, started toward the enclosure, Mesquite by his side. They reached the gate and rested their arms on the top bar, each content to enjoy the other's company in silence. After a while Hopalong sighed and faced his companion.

"Kid," he said in a low voice, after looking carefully around to see that no one was near enough to overhear him. "I'm all healed up again, an' gettin' plumb fed up on bein' pampered like a baby. I been thinkin' about you purty hard, off havin' a good time chasin' them damn ambushin' skunks, while I had to set around an' be nursed plumb strong. You ain't got no idea

what I've been through, Kid, ever since I got outa bed." He sighed again and shook his head. "What you say about waitin' around here till after dark, when I can sneak away without bein' seen? Me an' you'll go up to Big Moose an' sift that town through a fine-mesh sieve. What you think of that, huh?"

Mesquite's face softened and then grew hard. He shook his head emphatically.

"You ain't ridin' off with me till the Doc says you can."

"Holy maverick, Kid! I ain't seen him for a couple of weeks!"

"Then you better see him right soon, for you don't go ridin' around lookin' for trouble till you get *plumb* well."

"Why, I ain't never been no better in all my life than I am right now! Don't you reckon *I* know when I'm feelin' all right?"

"I know that yo're itchin' to bite off more than you can chew," retorted the youth; "but you ain't goin' to bite it off with no help of mine. I'm goin' back to Big Moose, an' I'm goin' right soon; yo're stayin' here till the Doc turns you loose. That's flat."

"But you can't get Shanghai on his own range without me, Kid," said Hopalong, earnestly. "Red an' Lanky won't get him; but I know how to."

"All right, then; I reckon I'll have to chase him off his own range," retorted the youth. "I'm goin' to get him, an' I don't care where it happens. All of which ain't interestin' you none a-tall: you don't ride with me till the Doc says you can."

"You ain't treatin' me right, Kid."

"If I thought that was true, Hoppy, I'd ride off an' never come back. There ain't no man on earth that I'd rather be with ridin' into Big Moose, or any place else, than you. I want to get the other two coyotes an' clean the slate; but if you want me to stay here with you I'll let 'em slide, an' take a chance on gettin' 'em later. But you can't go with me to-day."

Hopalong looked at the suspicious piebald and gravely winked one eye. He dragged his arms from the gate bar, slouched dejectedly, and started slowly toward the bunkhouse.

"All right, Kid," he said in weary resignation. "I reckon I got to play baby awhile longer. Come on: I get tired, standin' up so long," and this time he winked at the bunkhouse door.

"What'd I tell you?" demanded Mesquite. "If you get tired leanin' against the corral, what would happen to you if you tried to ride up to Big Moose, with a fight waiting for you, mebby, if you got there?"

"Mebby yo're right; but I shore hate to admit it," growled Hopalong. "When you figgerin' on goin' back up there?" he asked, knowing that his companion had gone without sleep for a long time.

"After I get some sleep," answered Mesquite. "I'll turn in till noon, get somethin' to eat, an' pull out right after."

Hopalong nodded and turned toward the kitchen, where the cook was making a din with dishes and voice.

"I'll stop some of that damn noise for you," he said.

"You take my bunk if you want. Wait till I clear it off for you." He removed the belt, gun, and saddle which covered the bed, growling about the man who had put them there. He carried the saddle to the door and placed it close to the wall, where Skinny would trip over it if he followed his usual habit of swinging on the door casing and shooting himself along the wall to his bunk. The belt he slung around him and buckled loosely. It was Mesquite's belt and Mesquite's gun. His gaze settled on the belts and guns which his young friend was hanging on their pegs, and his eyes shone a little.

"How you like that pair, Kid?"

Mesquite flushed from pride and smiled.

"First rate, Hoppy," he answered. "I was never so proud in all my life as when you let me know that you was lendin' 'em to me. When you want 'em back again, just say the word."

"I loaned 'em to you to get them fellers with, Kid. When you've got 'em all you can give the guns back to me. Yo're the only man that ever wore 'em, except me." He looked around the room, did not see what he sought, and again started toward the galley. "Turn in now. I'll choke the cook, an' go out an' set with Pete an' help him watch the prisoners."

Pete was glad to see him, but did not take his eyes from the two men sitting in the shack, except for one quick glance. Pete Wilson was a little slow-witted, but he was doggedly faithful to Hopalong. In his eyes Hopalong was the greatest man that ever had lived,

and a man who could do no wrong. A contented grin slid across the sentry's face and he shifted his cud to the other cheek.

"I been sorta hankerin' for 'em to make a break," said Pete, patting the ten-gauge affectionately. "Got *two* barrels here, one for each of 'em; but buckshot ain't hardly big enough. I wanted Buck to lemme load her with pistol bullets; but he said these here was big enough."

"Single ball would 'a' been better," said Hopalong, gravely, as he sat down on the ground and tucked his legs under him.

"By gosh!" said Pete with keen interest. "That's right! Get me a couple shells with them."

"Ain't got none."

Pete shook his head sadly and chewed in quiet reflection.

"Where'd Skinny go?"

"Round to bust that piebald. You'll hear it purty soon."

"Them fellers in there got any water an' grub?" asked Hopalong, glad that the pestiferous Skinny was going to be very busy for the next few minutes.

"Yeah, they have; but they been sorta leary about reachin' for it," explained Pete, carefully shifting the double-barrel. Both hammers were at full cock, and this fact seemed to be of intense interest to the men in the shack.

"Turn that lead sprayer a little to the left, an' let 'em drink an' eat," ordered Hopalong, also interested in the cocked hammers. Pete handled weapons with

that nonchalant carelessness which always intrigues the interest of everyone within range.

"Pete," said Hopalong in surprise as he gazed at the belts slung around the guard's waist, "what you wearin' two guns for? Ain't one gun an' that there ten-gauge enough for watchin' a couple of men that are handcuffed together?"

"Well, I just put 'em on in case I needed 'em," answered Pete, grinning cheerfully.

"There's one of them you don't need near as much as I'm goin' to," said Hopalong. "Where'd you get that extra one?"

"It's one that Buck took off that gang that Mesquite rounded up in Twin River. Want it?"

"Reckon I do," answered Hopalong, drawing the weapon from its holster and balancing it in his hand. "Why, this is a dead ringer for my own guns. Feels right natural. Gimme the belt till I see how she hangs."

He removed it and then slung it around his own waist as he stood up, let out two more holes in the strap, and patted it to a comfortable fit.

"Feels right good again, wearin' two guns. Pete, I want you to do somethin' for me an' keep yore mouth tight shut about it. Mesquite's ridin' away close after dinner. I want you to go out an' wrangle me my best cayuse, an' picket it in a hollow or draw where I can find it right handy. You do it between now an' noon, an' I'll sit here with that shotgun an' hold these fellers down."

"But Buck said for me to stay right here," protested Pete, as a matter of duty.

"You gimme that shotgun; go up an' tell Buck that I'm takin' yore place while you ride around an' limber up for a couple of hours, but don't you say why I'm relievin' you. Then come back here, get these Colts an' my Sharps, an' take 'em with you an' leave 'em near the cayuse."

Pete surrendered the double-barrelled weapon and walked to his horse, picketed near the kitchen; and when he returned a few minutes later he collected the guns and went on his way.

Two hours passed and then he rode up again, dismounted, and held out his hand for the shotgun. Once again seated in front of the door, he chuckled and leaned closer to his friend, telling where he had left the horse, and adding that he had ridden it "a mite" to take the edge off its meanness, in case Hopalong might not have recovered enough to exert his full strength.

Noon came and passed, and Mesquite roped a fresh horse in the little corral and made ready to depart. He smiled sympathetically at the wistful expression on his friend's face, made a couple of foolish remarks to hide his own feelings, and loped northward in the general direction of Big Moose.

Hopalong watched him until he had shrunk to a pin point, and then wandered out to the same corral, his eyes on an old mare. This animal had long since lost its speed and stamina, and was practically a pensioner. It seldom failed to insist on getting rounded up with the saddle horses, after a pitiful show of independence, and could not be kept out of the cavy without considerable effort. Every morning it was collected with

the others, driven into the horse corral, and turned out again every evening. Day after day it went through this performance, was sworn at by the wranglers in turn, who secretly had a deal of affection for it, and once in a while some grinning puncher would throw a saddle on its old back and pretend to be half scared to death during the sham pitching which ensued.

Up at the ranchhouse Buck Peters peered through a window and saw the convalescent wander toward the corral. The rope in Hopalong's hand aroused a surprising amount of suspicion in the foreman's mind; but it disappeared, and a grin passed over Buck's face as he saw the rope settle over the head of the old pensioner. He grinned still more when Hopalong led the old-timer to the bunkhouse and put a saddle on it. When Hopalong mounted and rode slowly toward the ranchhouse Buck drew back from the window and wandered to the door.

"Hello!" he said in simulated surprise as Hopalong drew up. "You must be feelin' purty strong to take a chance on that man-killer."

Hopalong grinned foolishly.

"Honest, Buck," he replied. "It's been so long since I sat a saddle that I just has to get the feel of it again." He patted the scrawny neck, and then thumbed it, and pretended to be frightened by the sudden show of anger. "Bad cayuse, Buck; plumb bad."

"Ain't none worse, I reckon," chuckled Buck, whose eyes had taken in the empty rifle scabbard and the total lack of gun-belts and Colts. "Look out she don't bust in a couple of ribs for you. Where you goin'?"

"Figgerin' on dashin' up to Big Moose an' shootin' up the town," answered Hopalong, grinning.

Buck doubted that the old mare could carry his friend to Big Moose in two days, and again the lack of weapons reassured him: Hopalong was not going to ride very far. He chuckled again.

"If you run acrost Red an' Lanky tell 'em to get the hell out of there an' come back here, where there's plenty of real work waitin' for 'em."

"I'll do that very thing," replied Hopalong, grinning again.

"I ain't got no time to waste standin' here foolin' with you," growled Buck, his mind on the account book. "Reckon a little ride will be a right good thing for you. Take some of the meanness outa you, mebby."

"Then you better straddle a cayuse an' ride with me," retorted Hopalong. "All the same, Buck, you ain't got no idea how good a saddle feels."

"Want to borrow my gun?"

"Got a better one of my own any time I want to carry it," retorted Hopalong. "Don't hardly believe I'll run up ag'in no wild Injuns. Who's ridin' the north range to-day?"

"Billy. He's ridin' it if he ain't asleep in the shade of his cayuse."

Hopalong wheeled the mare and urged it forward.

"So-long," he called.

"So-long," grunted Buck, and turned back into the house to tell his wife that Hopalong had more sense than he had suspected, and that he seemed tickled half to death to feel a saddle under him again.

Hopalong rode north, following slowly on Mesquite's trail; but several miles from the bunkhouse he turned aside, followed down a dry-wash, and after a few miles more he dismounted near a high-strung horse which had fought Pete with unbounded enthusiasm, and which now eyed the newcomer suspiciously. Ten minutes later Hopalong Cassidy, astride a real horse, with his rifle in its sheath and two gun-belts sagging heavily from his hips, rode northward again, driving before him a docile old mare whose gentle gait made him swear fretfully.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE MASTER TAKES CARDS

THE few lights of Big Moose spotted the dark with pin points of sickly yellow, and Mesquite paused on the brow of a hill to look down upon them before taking the slope. As he stared down on the town he thought sadly of Hopalong's desire to be with him, and determined to get through with his tasks as soon as possible. He had wasted part of the afternoon in order that he would not reach the town before dark, and now he was eager to put matters to the test.

On the old wagon road several miles east of the town a horseman rode at a lope through the darkness, bound for Big Moose and whatever might await him there. He knew the town well, far better than did the man he was following; and he pretty well knew most of the permanent inhabitants. More frequently now he was shifting his position in the saddle, resting one set of muscles by throwing the strains on others; stubbornly refusing to admit how tired he was, and trying to ignore the physical weakness which taunted the strength of his spirit. Having gone this far he would not quit until he had accomplished his purpose, and so he shifted again and set his jaws and pushed steadily onward.

After what seemed to be an interminable length of

time this rider reached the top of a hill south of Big Moose and drew up, swaying a little. He rested while his gaze passed over the dark collection of shacks below him, pausing here and there as lights held his attention. He ached all over and his arms seemed to be made of lead. After a few minutes he dismounted, tied the horse to a stunted tree, and started down the slope, stumbling a little now and then. When halfway to the bottom he stopped to rest, and a hand dropped to a gun-butt as the hoot of an owl sounded from the opposite edge of the town. The cry was very well done, but to his ears it sounded suspicious. His life had been crowded by many experiences which had taught him not to take things at their face value. The saloon was now of secondary interest, and he pushed on through the dark, as straight as he could go toward the place whence that hoot had sounded. If it was a warning signal it had not been given about him, since it was too far away; but he could guess whom it might concern.

Mesquite was moving in the darkness in the general direction of the saloon which had proved to be so interesting on his former visit. In his haste to get the work over with he was not as cautious as he might have been, and the hoot passed almost unnoticed. Before him lay the littered square in front of the saloon, to cross which from that direction were foolhardy. He worked around this open space and then approached the building from the north, and tried to find a serviceable crack among the scores of cracks in the flimsy shade which blocked the window in that wall. There were cracks enough to let a glow of radiance through, where the

sizing had been abraded by years of service; but not one of them was wide enough or open enough to give him a glimpse of what lay behind. He did not realize how vividly he was outlined against that luminous yellow square, how plainly he was silhouetted to a keen-eyed watcher. The ringing notes of a distant whip-poor-will made no impression on his consciousness, and after a moment he slipped along the wall, turned the corner, and stopped beside the rear door, his hand cautiously feeling for the latch. Slowly he moved it, ready to surge against the planks and send them swinging inward when the bar was free.

He had no way of knowing that things had happened swiftly in that room, that the first hoot of the owl had sent a dozen men scurrying to agreed-upon positions, half of them watching the front door; the other half, the rear. With the sounding of the whip-poor-will all eyes had focused on the rear entrance, and now were intently watching the almost imperceptible rising of the latch and its home-made bar. Neither did he, nor they, know that the owl would hoot no more that night; that the whip-poor-will had felt a gun-butt crash against its head and was now bound and gagged. Neither he, nor they, knew that an almost exhausted man was dragging himself toward that littered square, desperately eager to get to the front door of that saloon.

Mesquite, the latch raised as high as it would go, hurled himself against the door and sent it crashing back against the inner wall, following it like an angry cat, both guns breast high and balanced for action. Then the light was blotted out, he found himself half

suffocated in the folds of a blanket, his guns torn and knocked from his hands, and he was fighting for his life in a snarling pack of thieves. The hands on throat, wrists, and ankles were too many; and the rope which bound him, coil after coil, made him helpless. Mercifully the blanket had been torn in the struggle, else he would have died from suffocation. Realizing that he was only wearing himself out and that he might need all his strength later on, he ceased to struggle, and lay inertly against the wall.

Foxy Joe, his right hand against the side of his face where a bullet had left a bloody furrow, turned furiously to the man whose plan had been carried out.

"It's all damn nonsense, takin' that pup prisoner!" he snapped, angrily. "We could just as well 'a' riddled him when the door opened, an' saved ourselves a lot of trouble. Lookit what *I* got, an' all for nothin'!"

"An' made signs of a killin' for them damn punchers to see?" growled the bartender. "They'll be up here, every damn one of 'em, when they find he's missin'. An' *I'll* be the one that'll have to answer their questions. Too bad that bullet didn't go a couple of inches more to the right!"

"That so?" snapped Foxy Joe.

"There ain't no use startin' a row," urged another. "Put him on a hoss an' get it over with."

"Where you takin' him?"

"Any place out in the brush far enough west of town."

The exhausted man outside was crossing the square, staggering and resting, crawling and resting, stirred to frenzy by the sounds of the shots. He rested again,

gritted his teeth, and went on a few yards, his eyes fixed vengefully on that door. Let him reach that and touch its latch and he would show what price was paid for killing a friend of the Double-Y.

"Get a rustle on," said the bartender, anxiously. "As soon as you shoot him, scatter far an' wide, an' watch out what kind of tracks you leave. Hell's goin' to bust loose up here, shore as shootin'!" He stepped forward to oversee the handling of the prisoner, and he did not catch the slow and silent movement of the front door; did not see the crack slowly widening. "Come on! Move lively! Ain't you got no——"

"Han's up!" came a low, snarled order, whereat the trussed and bundled man at the base of the wall started to struggle furiously and to shout.

The answering movements were spasmodic, some of the postures ridiculous and contorted. Foxy Joe turned as white as his dirty face would permit, and seemed to have trouble with his breathing. The bartender instinctively reached toward his belt, and his whole upper body followed the downward swing of his arm, to crash on the floor and slowly straighten.

Through the smoke swirling around the door the startled crowd saw a man leaning against the sill for support, one knee on the floor. His face was working with rage, which now began to lessen as the meaning of the struggling figure near the wall drifted through his consciousness: Mesquite was not dead. The newcomer's elbows were fast against his sides, to seek what support they could obtain; and, as though this was not enough, the arms moved until the wrists rested against

the hips. In each hand was a Colt, both wobbling a little.

First among the crowd to sense the significance of that huddled posture, those hip-steadied wrists and the wavering guns was Foxy Joe, who believed that another few seconds would find him dead. His well-founded fear of that gun-man was overcome by the desperate situation in which he found himself, and the signs as he read them, and the rage and fear of a cornered wolf blazed in his eyes. In a jump he had gained the shelter of a rigidly erect friend and, thus bulwarked, reached for his gun; but as his elbow flashed out past the barrier another roar filled the room and was echoed by a shriek. The shock of the heavy bullet spun Joe sideways and he grabbed the falling gun with his other hand. Another roar from the door drove him backward in a stumble. He dropped his gun and leaped toward the window, diving at it head first, careless alike of glass or sash. He struck it alive, as another shot crashed out; and he was dead before his feet flashed through the ragged opening. A shaky laugh came from the sagging man in the door, and there was not a hand in the room that was lower than straining muscles could hold it.

"Untie him," said Hopalong, fighting with all his will to keep his consciousness until Mesquite was free to dominate the situation. "Untie—him, damn—you!" he grated.

The command was quickly although somewhat bunglingly obeyed, and Mesquite, aflame with rage, leaped to his feet and knocked down the two men nearest to him; and then, controlling himself, hastily dis-

armed the unresisting crowd. He seemed to be greatly interested in the weapons as he handled them and his frown increased until he chanced to glance at the bar. Two worn and battered Colts lay on it, and when his eager hands closed on them his exultant laugh rang out loudly.

"All right, Hoppy!" he shouted. "I got 'em!" He balanced them in his itching hands and searched the line for an excuse to use them; but no excuse offered, and he backed the cowed crowd against a wall.

The man in the door was now down on both knees, and his two guns sagged almost to the floor. He swayed a little, and stiffened, and smiled reassuringly at his suddenly anxious and understanding friend.

"I'm all right, Kid," he said. "Just a little tired, that's all. Just a little tired, an' mad as all hell." He paused a moment, and continued: "String a rope through the trigger guards of them guns, an' we'll get outa here." Again he paused. "Till to-morrow, Kid; till to-morrow."

In a few moments Mesquite threw the rope over his shoulder, sagging a little from its weight, walked briskly to the front door, slipped an arm under one of Hopalong's, and then faced the crowd again as his friend sheathed his guns.

"I'll remember every face in this room," he snarled. "To-morrow we come back again, an' we come a-shootin'; an' for a lead dollar I'd start the shootin' now!"

The crowd remained silent, not being able to think of anything to say. It watched the two punchers fade

out of the little square of lamplight on the ground outside, and listened to the slow footsteps dying out across the square. Perhaps in its collective mind it saw a hard-riding outfit pounding northwestwardly through the night somewhere on the Twin River-Big Moose trail, an outfit keyed to vengeance.

"—— ——!" said a voice, breaking the tense and punishing silence; and with the sound of that curse the crowd came to life. It stirred, it leaped, and by three exits sought the enfolding safety of the sheltering night and the added safety which horses and growing distance might provide.

Hopalong Cassidy had not quite bitten off more than he could chew.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### BY SHORT CUT AND TRAIL

BUCK PETERS was becoming anxious. It was now nearly supper time, and Hopalong had not returned. In Buck's mind his friend was not nearly as well as he had claimed to be, and the owner's imagination was presenting pictures which were not pleasant.

"Damn fool!" growled Buck, pacing to and fro outside the ranchhouse kitchen. "He wanted to go with Mesquite an' get into that trouble up at Big Moose; but he didn't have a weapon on him when he left, an' he never would 'a' tried to make that ride on that old mare." The sounds of nearing horses sent him darting around the corner of the building; but his hopes died swiftly when he recognized the riders.

They drew up and grinned, and their appearance suggested that they had spent a hectic night. Slim Reilly, under foreman of the Cyclone ranch, over east of the Black Jack River, licked dry lips with a tongue that was somewhat thick and fuzzy.

"I want a couple gallons of that cold well water of yourn, Buck," he said; "anyhow, a couple will do to start with. What's itchin' you so bad?" he inquired, sensing the owner-foreman's anxiety.

"Oh, nothin'," growled Buck. "You fellers look like you spent the night with Slick Milligan."

"Slick's too wise a barkeep to get all het up like we was," said Jim French, closing his eyes for a moment. He opened them slowly and reluctantly, and sighed. "Couple gallons will do for a starter for me, too. Let us pass, Buck: we're wild an' woolly!"

"Tame an' cottony would be more like it," growled Slim. "I feel like I swallered a burnin' match, only no burnin' match ever had the flavour that I'm tastin'. Buck," he said, with but little interest, "somethin's shore ridin' you. Anything we can do?"

"After you soak up my well you both can foller the Big Moose trail as far as is handy, an' keep yore bleary eyes skinned for Hopalong," said Buck. "He saddled him a cayuse this noon an' went ridin', an' he ain't got back yet. If he gets weak an' falls off'n that saddle, or them wounds open up——"

"Yeah," said Slim, thoughtfully, who knew all about Hopalong's adventure. "We'll ride up that way, anyhow. I hears the boys down around Twin River are talkin' rope."

Buck swore and nodded, thinking of the two prisoners he was holding on the ranch just for the purpose of cheating that rope.

"There's the well; can you draw up the bucket without fallin' in?"

"I'll hold onter his belt," said Jim, trying to grin, and followed his friend toward the little well house.

Buck hesitated and then swung off toward the bunkhouse for the tenth time in two hours, and as he reached

it he saw Skinny Thompson wander around the far corner. Skinny stopped and leaned against the wall. Leaning was Skinny's most prominent habit. He never stopped near anything without leaning against it.

"Still worryin'?" he demanded, grinning provocatively.

"Yes, I am! An' if you ain't, you oughta be!"

"Here comes Billy: mebby he's seen him," suggested Skinny.

Billy Williams rode up, and his grin slowly faded as he read the expression on Buck's face. Buck was the principal owner of the ranch, and its foreman; but he complained that no one believed either fact.

"Where's the funeral, Buck?"

"Don't get so blasted smart!" snapped Buck. "You seen Hoppy this afternoon?"

"No; how could I? I been out on the north section all day."

"An' that's why I'm askin'you. He rode off that way."

Billy scratched his head and grinned as the obvious explanation came to him.

"Huh! You mean he started that way. Betcha he's down in Twin River helpin' Slick Milligan's business."

"Reilly and French, of the Cyclone, just came from there," replied Buck, and explained the situation to the attentive Billy.

"Shucks," said Billy, his grin growing. "You make me sick. Can't you get it into yore head that Hoppy's plumb growed up? Ridin' that old mare, an' you

worryin' about him! Time to worry is when it gets dark. With his appetite, if he ain't back by the time supper is over, then we'll all get a little worried. Where's Pete?"

Buck forced a smile.

"I ain't exactly worried," he lied, "but I was just wonderin' if he rode up yore way."

"No, you ain't worried; yo're near sick with it, that's all: an' him a long-horned, moss-head of a maverick. Where's Pete?"

"'Round back watchin' them two assassins," growled Buck, and started for the house.

Billy watched him for a moment and then looked at the leaning Skinny.

"He's loco. What you moochin' about?"

"None of yore damn business," said Skinny, going into the bunkhouse.

Billy chuckled and went around to where his friend Pete maintained a hopeful vigil on the prisoners; hopeful that they would make a break and give him a chance to fire two heavy loads of buckshot at a range of a dozen feet. Billy glanced into the old building at the shackled prisoners and then looked down at his friend.

"What's all this hellabaloo about Hoppy bein' missin'?" he demanded.

"Went for a ride," grunted Pete. "Who said he was missin'?"

"Buck. What makes you look so funny?"

"I ain't lookin' funny. I'm just laughin'," said Pete.

"What's there to laugh about, with Hoppy hell-to-

leatherin' all over the range, an' him bein' too weak to do much ridin'?"

"Who said he was too weak for ridin'?"

"*I* said so, you flat-faced cow! Suppose he falls off that saddle, or them wounds open up, an' he bleeds to death? Laugh *now*, will you?"

"My Gawd!" said Pete, for the moment forgetting the prisoners.

"Thought so!" snapped Billy, turning to go back to the bunkhouse. "Huh! If he was on any horse but that old mare I'd be worried stiff."

"My Gawd!" said Pete, his face paling. "He ain't on that old mare, Billy! He's on that three-year-old sorrel that Skinny busted that time."

"What?" yelled Billy, so loudly that the sound of it caught Buck in mid-stride as he was going through the ranchhouse kitchen door, and caused him to turn in mid-stride and start back toward the bunkhouse on a run. "On that sorrel!" repeated Billy. "Why, that sorrel has been off on the range for near three weeks. How'd he get it?"

"I caught it for him, staked it out, an' he rode the old mare up there an' changed. He *told* me to do it!"

"Did he!" snapped Billy. "Then *I*'m tellin' you to put yore mouth over the muzzle of that shotgun an' pull both triggers!" shouted Billy, whirling around. He struck the earth about once every dozen feet and he was going so fast when he tried to turn the corner of the bunkhouse that he slid full length in the sand.

"What's the matter, Billy?" asked Skinny, leaning

against the window casing and poking his head out. "Step on somethin' slippery?"

"You want to step in a stirrup, an' step damn fast!" retorted Billy, arising. "Hoppy's ridin' that blasted sorrel you busted last year, an' it ain't been worked for three weeks!"

"What's that?" yelled Buck, trying to stop. In this effort he was assisted by the bunkhouse wall, which bounced him back and rocked him on his heels. "What sorrel? What you talkin' about? He was on the old mare!"

"Shore," said Billy. "He *was*. We admit that; but he didn't stay there. Ask Pete: he's the bright-eyed idiot that helped Hoppy cold-deck you."

Buck forthwith asked Pete. Skinny helped him. They both talked at once, and used words not ordinarily regarded as good English; but Pete, slow-witted as he was reputed to be, had no difficulty in understanding them; and when he started to explain there were three talking at once.

"Picketed him that cayuse, huh?" shouted Buck. "Toted his guns up there, huh? You wasn't satisfied with givin' him that —— —— sorrel, but you had to give him two Colts an' a rifle, too! Don't you know he was itchin' to help Mesquite get Foxy Joe an' Shanghai? If you had twice as many brains as you got now you'd mebby have some sense! Great Judas priest!"

Buck turned to speak to Skinny, but found that long and lanky individual had departed, and Buck ran for the same corner of the bunkhouse, and slipped where

Billy had slipped. When he got on his feet he saw Skinny saddling a horse at the corral gate, and he started on a jump to borrow Skinny's rope and thus save half a minute. Buck reached the corral bars as Reilly and French loped up, sagging with water which only took the edge off their carefully cultivated thirsts.

"S'matter, Buck?" they asked in one breath, and then nodded their heads as they picked out a few words of the emphatic and hurried answer.

"I ain't anxious to face the old man right now, anyhow," said Slim; "an' he'd never forgive us if we didn't help find Cassidy. We'll get a lantern, an' start."

"Besides which," said his friend, cheerfully, "there's a first-class bar up in Big Moose. *Wh-e-e-e-e!* Foller my dust!"

Slim rode to the bunkhouse, got a lantern, and mounted to follow his distant friend.

"Yo're ridin' a jack rabbit," shouted Slim, "but this here cayuse is part greyhound! *Wh-e-e-e-e!*"

"Foller the trail!" yelled Buck. "We'll take the short cuts!"

Slim's arm arose in the dust cloud and the Cyclone rider bore off a little to the right.

Buck saddled, mounted, and dashed back to the ranchhouse, where his anxious wife stood in the kitchen door.

"Saddle up, Rose, an' ride to the Cyclone! I want every man they've got! Hoppy's up in Big Moose, if he got that far! Send them there as fast as they can ride!"

Rose darted from the door, grabbed her saddle from the rail, and ran to where her own horse was picketed. In a few minutes a roan thoroughbred was tearing a ribbon of dust from the sun-baked plain in the direction of the Cyclone.

## CHAPTER XXV

### A RED-HEADED FOX

IN A log hut on the outskirts of Big Moose, Mesquite Jenkins stood at the side of a window listening for suspicious sounds outside. To his left was the heavy door, securely barred; behind him was another window, closed by a heavy shutter; at his right in a bunk against the wall lay Hopalong Cassidy, sleeping the sleep of exhaustion, his heavy breathing the only sound to be heard in the night. Occasionally Mesquite moved from the open window to the door and the other window and went back again. The town was silent, which made him suspicious. He thought that the shacks were being examined in turn and that his log fortress would at last be reached, and this silence made him uneasy. He did not know that the gang had fled from the town and that no attack would come. Two of its members still lay where they had fallen, one on the floor of the saloon, plain to be seen in the light of the still burning lamps; one outside the building, hidden by the darkness. The fighting had not aroused the other inhabitants, for gunfire was taken more or less for granted, and as a hint for other people to mind their own business. Mesquite relaxed and groped for a chair, where he sat down to watch the open window and

to wait for dawn, and where he caught himself nodding from time to time as his heavy eyelids drooped.

He sat bolt upright with a start. Hoofbeats sounded along the Twin River trail, swiftly coming nearer. They increased in number as they increased in volume, and he pictured strung-out riders racing toward trouble. Straight for the little square they came, and stopped before the saloon. He put out his hand in the darkness and let it pass reassuringly over the pile of captured weapons on the table, and then slowly arose and once more took up his place beside the open window. If this meant an attack there would be more than two dead men in town when the sun arose. Now he thought he understood the previous silence: The gang, never dreaming that he and Hopalong had taken refuge in the town itself, had scoured the surrounding country in vain and was now returning to comb the town.

Down in the littered square a horseman drew up abruptly in front of the saloon and leaped to the ground as another shot into sight past the nearest house. The first, gun in hand, leaped recklessly through the open door and paused in amazement. The room was empty. No: a boot heel projected from behind an overturned table. Buck strode straight for this barrier, his gun upraised. He kicked the table partly around as his weapon slanted down; but he did not fire.

"Wild-goose chase," said a regretful voice from the door, where Skinny Thompson stopped to lean against the casing as he looked around. "He never got this far, Buck; the town's too damn peaceful."

"Huh!" growled Buck, stepping back without taking

his eyes from the prostrate figure. "*This* looks like he got here!"

Skinny pushed from the door casing and looked for himself.

"Tom Whiteley," he grunted. Turning his head he saw the broken window. "Look there, Buck: somebody left in a hurry. Reckon he got here, all right."

Buck swung around and regarded the window, and then slowly walked to it and stuck his head through it.

"There's another layin' out here," he said. "Go 'round an' see who it is." He glanced toward the door as another horse stopped in front of it, and Billy Williams leaped through the opening like a bundle of springs. He grabbed Skinny to soften the collision.

"Find out anythin'?"

Skinny recovered his balance and loosened his grip.

"He was here," he answered, and went out in the darkness to establish an identity. In a moment he stuck his head in through the broken window, and winced as Billy's gun chopped down to cover him.

"What the hell you doin'?" demanded Skinny, with heat.

"Ain't you got no sense, stickin' yore fool head in a winder like that?"

"Shut up!" said Buck. "Who is it?"

"Foxy Joe," answered Skinny. "Three bullets in him: elbow, shoulder, an' head. Anyhow, reckon we're on the right trail."

"We got to find out," said Buck. "Come on."

They filed out of the building and began a series of visits in an effort to get news of their missing friend.

Their methods were not those generally adopted by callers, and they left a string of swearing hosts behind them, and found out nothing of value. Returning to the saloon, they put out the lights and prepared to wait for dawn, and with the first paling of the sky a furious clattering told of the approach of the Cyclone riders, who gave vocal notice of their arrival. Judging from the manners of this outfit the ranch had been well named. They reached the square in a solid body with guns in their hands. They piled through the door of the saloon en masse, shouting greetings to the arising Double-Y trio, and stormed the bar. Ben Ruff, foreman, vaulted the counter, grabbed a bottle of bourbon, and held it carelessly in his outstretched hand while he hunted along the under-bar for something.

"Whatcha lookin' for?" impatiently asked a thirsty friend.

"Corkscrew, of course!" snapped Ben, still hunting.

"Aw, hell," said the friend, his gun spurting.

Ben whirled to save what he could of the liquor, but found that there was no need to worry about salvage. The top of the neck had been neatly removed, and the man who had removed it was holding out a glass for his reward. Ben surrendered the bottle and looked at the Double-Y foreman. "You seen a couple of punchers of mine?"

"They'll be here right soon," answered Buck, explaining briefly. Then he suggested a plan of action. "We'll all spread out an' search the hills. Hoppy got here, all right; but I don't know where he went."

"How you know he got here?" asked Ruff.

"Look behind that table, an' out that busted winder," answered Buck.

A procession started for the overturned table and came back by way of the window.

"Took three shots to get Joe," said a puncher. "Don't look like Hoppy's shootin' a-tall."

"Mebby Joe was duckin' an' dodgin'," suggested another. "That head shot was dead centre."

At the other end of the bar Buck was talking to the Cyclone foreman.

"—— spread out an' search the hills. We'll mebby get trace of him. Us three know the tracks of that sorrel."

"Shore," answered Ruff, heartily, "but first we'll take this town apart. Can't tell what happened." He turned and got his outfit's attention. "Search every shack, an' don't be none too polite. This town's earned a little hard luck. If we don't find nothin' here, we'll comb the country. One more drink around, an' then get busy."

Buck looked around to say something to Skinny, but could not find him. Skinny, on a gamble, was following two sets of footprints, one of which looked somewhat familiar in the slightly irregular spacing of the marks. Hopalong limped a little. And before Buck could make up his mind one way or another there sounded a shrill whoop on the Twin River trail, where two Cyclone punchers, with growing thirsts, raced toward the square. One of them carried a lighted lantern and held it up in salutation. A gun roared from the saloon, and the

lantern bearer dropped what was left of it and spat violently. They whirled up to the door and made a dash for the bar.

"No sign of him, Peters," shouted Slim. "Gimme a *big* glass: that kerosene near choked me."

"Yeah, an' some of it plumb ruined my tobacco," snapped Jim French. "Ain't you fellers got no sense a-tall?"

Skinny turned the corner of a shack and stopped, his gaze tracing the footprints to the door of another. Grinning widely, he stepped back behind the corner, drew his Colt, and sent a shot into the door of the other cabin. The answering bullet cut the top of his hat and shattered the chinking of the logs above his head.

"Hey!" he yelled, somewhat startled by the promptness of the reply. "It's *me*, Hoppy! Don't shoot, Mesquite! It's *Skinny!*"

He heard the murmur of voices and then a loud and profane question. Answering this, he obeyed the following order by stepping into sight with his hands above his head. The door opened and Mesquite looked out at him, and then turned his head to listen to what his companion was saying. Skinny wandered up to the door, pushed it open, and grinned at his two friends. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that Hopalong appeared to be none the worse for his recent activities, and he hastily told what had happened.

"Next time anybody tells me what a sick man I am, I'm aimin' to crown him with a gun-butt," said Hopalong, arising. "Lead the way, Skinny," and as his

cheerful friend stepped out of the door, Hopalong whispered a few words in Mesquite's ear. Then he joined Skinny and led the way toward the square.

"Ain't the Kid comin'?" asked Skinny, curiously.

"He'll show up when he gets ready," answered Hopalong, chuckling. "Don't say nothin' to nobody about him."

The crowd in front of the saloon was getting ready to spread out and search the town when a shout made its members turn to see a limping red-head walking at the side of a lean and lanky puncher. Greetings rent the air and there was a rush toward the newcomers.

"Hello, fellers," chuckled Hopalong, shaking hands all around. "Glad to see you all. I figgered there might be a rush this mornin', but never reckoned it would be made by our friends. Hello, Buck: was you worried?"

"You know —— —— I was worried!" snapped Buck. "What you mean, actin' like that? Ain't you got no sense a-tall?"

"Hell, no!" shouted Ben Ruff. "If he had any sense he wouldn't be worth a cuss." He made a dive for the grinning absentee and slapped him on the shoulder. "Any time you want a job with a *good* foreman, Cassidy, you come over an' see me."

When the conversation settled down to ordinary tones, Ben Ruff waved his outfit to the horses.

"Well," he said, "reckon we'll drift for home, seein' everythin's all right; unless you fellers want to wreck the town?"

"Wait a minute, Ben," said Hopalong. "Seems to

me this is a good chance to get old Shanghai, seein' as we're all up here together an' have the time."

Buck snorted. "Don't you forget that you bet me a hundred dollars that Mesquite would get that old coyote! If *we* get him, you lose."

Hopalong nodded. "Gotta chance that, Buck; but we got to get Shanghai or he'll make us the laughin' stock of the whole country." He turned to Ruff. "Willin' to foller my plays?"

"Shore; start dealin'."

"All right," replied Hopalong. "You fellers all stay right here, in a bunch, till I go over an' talk to old Tom Jennings. Tom allus was a good friend of Shanghai's, an' mebby I can scare a lead out of him. If anybody knows where that old coyote is, he'll know."

Old Tom Jennings, general storekeeper, hide buyer, and suspected of being an ex-agent for buyers of stolen cattle, had spent a restless night. Dawn had found him up and dressed and taking great interest in the town's noisy visitors. From a vantage point in the rear of his store he was now watching the crowd before the saloon, and when he saw Hopalong walk toward his place of business he slipped behind the counter and began to rearrange the contents of a shelf.

"Hello, Jennings," said Hopalong, stalking through the doorway.

"Why, hello, Cassidy," replied Jennings, peering curiously at his caller. "What can I do fer ye?"

"You can tell me where Shanghai's hidin' out, an' you can tell me damn quick!" answered Hopalong, looking as ferocious as he could.

"Why, I don't know whar he's a-hangin' out," replied the storekeeper in mild surprise. "He come in here three, four nights ago, got a gunny sack of supplies, an' went off ag'in without payin' me fer 'em. After he left I began to put together what he said, an' I got the notion that he's left the country. Where he went I don't know, but I'd like to, right enough, dang him. He was bein' chased purty hard an' seemed a mite desprit."

Hopalong's hand blurred, and a gun appeared in it.

"You can't run no bluff on me, Jennings. Speak right out: where is he?"

"You hadn't oughta do that, Cassidy," replied the old man, reproachfully. "I'm an old man, an' I ain't got a gun on me; an' if I had one on me I'd know better'n to go fur it. I ain't got many more years to live, but I'm shore stingy with what there is of 'em. If you shoot me fer not answerin' that question, then I'll have ter take it. I don't know where he is, an' that's the truth."

Hopalong maintained his ferocious expression, although he wanted to laugh; and he did not have even the remotest intention of pulling the trigger. He appeared reluctant to believe the old man's statement, which he knew to be a lie, and he slowly put up his gun.

"I think yo're lyin', Jennings," he said; "but I can't shoot a man as old as you. Let me tell you this, though: we've all come up here to get Shanghai, an' we're goin' to rake the hills an' ravines for twenty miles around before we quit. I figgered you could save us a lot of ridin'. You won't save him by keepin' still."

Reluctantly he turned to leave. "Well, all right. He ain't got a chance. By to-morrow night every trail will be guarded, and we'll be combin' clean an' fine, if it takes two weeks."

"I ain't got no idear a-tall where he is," said the storekeeper, his mind racing along a plan that was outlining itself. "I was just gettin' ready to close up when you come in; got to ride out an c'llect a bill. Reckon you'll have yore trouble fer nothin', for I'm shore figgerin' he's plumb left the country."

"We figger different," snapped Hopalong, going out and slamming the door behind him. As he walked back toward the waiting group in front of the saloon his glance strayed around the encircling hills, and swiftly returned to his waiting friends.

"Well?" inquired Buck, impatiently.

"Tight-mouthed as a fresh-water clam," growled Hopalong. "First we'll look through the town: the old fox may be hidin' right under our noses, like me an' the Kid hid under their noses last night."

"Where is the Kid?" asked Buck, curiously.

"Huntin' Shanghai," chuckled Hopalong. "He figgers he can win that bet for me."

"Huh!" snorted Buck, and told the crowd to scatter and search every nook and corner of the town.

"Wait! We oughta do this systematic," said Hopalong, fearing that his plan might be spoiled. "Start on the west edge an' work east, takin' every shack in order. We won't miss none that way."

Buck, the unsuspecting, nodded, and gave the order, which was to cost him the bet.

"Good idear," he said. "Come on, boys: start on the west fringe, an' make a clean job as you go." He pinned his sheriff's badge on the lapel of his coat. "I'm swearin' you all in as depitties: get busy!"

They left a man to watch the horses and hastened away to carry out the orders, leaving the square deserted except for the horse guard. Hopalong followed them, and the search began.

Old Tom Jennings, crouched behind his counter, peered over its top anxiously, straining his ears to catch the careless words in the square. He scarcely could believe his good fortune, and as soon as the last man disappeared on the hunt, he thumbed his nose at the horse guard, and frantically stuffed canned foods and bacon into a sack. Dragging this along the floor to keep the guard from espying it, he slipped to his rear door and scurried to the flimsy stable a few yards away. It took him only a minute to saddle up, throw the sack across the animal, and ride eastward out of town, keeping the shacks between him and the noisy men combing the west section. Reaching a sheltering ravine in safety, he turned his horse and sent it into a gallop toward the north, bending low in the saddle as though to add the power of his will to the straining efforts of his mount. Knowing the country as well as he knew his own store, he found ravine after ravine, gully after gully, to mask his flight.

On top of a hill east of town a prostrate man wriggled backward down the far slope, put on his sombrero, and hastened down to his horse. In a moment he was racing northward on the side of the hill away from the hurrying

storekeeper. Some time later he slowed, dismounted, went up the hill on foot, and peered eagerly over the top. Below him in the mixture of sand and clay forming the bottom of a ravine was a line of fresh horse tracks. Back again in the saddle, he went through a dip in the hills and came to that plain trail.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### TRAIL'S END

SHANGHAI, the man who had outguessed Mesquite every time they had come in contact, lay among the rocks on the rim of the cliffs which surrounded his hide-out. He had little to worry about, for his place of refuge had been selected with a wariness creditable in a fox. The small bowl-shaped valley was more a pocket in the plateau, since it lay off on one side of the main valley and apparently had no outlet; but if a rider followed a precarious ledge which turned and twisted up the clean rock face of the cliff and which seemed to dwindle into nothing, he would have come to a narrow opening perfectly screened from any one in the valley below. This led for a hundred yards back into the cliff and was formed by a crevice which had become nearly filled with detritus. At the inner end of the passage opened the little valley, with a small spring in the middle of several acres of good grass. The water flowed a few hundred yards and sank into the ground, appearing far down on the outer face of the cliff, where it oozed from a stratum of rotten rock and moistened a small area of the great wall. Behind Shanghai, down in the bowl, was a lean-to hut built of adobe, rocks, and logs; at the far end of the enclosed pasture grazed his

horse. Only one thing need concern him, and that was his own food supply; and this could be renewed at night with the friendly aid of old Tom Jennings.

Shanghai lay at ease, basking in the sun, his gaze idly taking in miles of country, at the far side of which lay Big Moose. A movement caught his eye, and he focused on it. At length he knew it to be a horseman, and for a moment he became uneasy; but as the minutes passed and the rider drew nearer, the old watcher chuckled. The newcomer was gesturing peculiarly with both arms. Shanghai wriggled backward, went down to his cabin, and waited for his friend with a jug by his side.

Tom Jennings took less time than usual in getting up to and through the crevice, and his friend sensed that something important had caused the visit: the sack full of supplies would have suggested that.

"Set down an' have a nip, Tom," invited the host, offering the jug.

"Ain't got time to palaver needless," replied Tom, taking the jug. "I got to get back before they get suspicious, or see me ridin' in from this direction. They're after you. Double-Y an' the Cyclone, both. Cassidy is with 'em. They killed Whiteley an' Foxy Joe last night, an' they're goin' to set guards on all the trails an' comb these hills for you if it takes 'em two weeks. You got time enough, I reckon; but I wouldn't waste much of it. Here's grub to last you."

"Thankee, Tom," replied the fugitive. He scratched his chin thoughtfully, spat with calm precision, and looked around his little hide-out. "Ain't shore I oughta

leave. Ain't nobody ever found this place but me an' you, an' we found it by accident. Tell me what happened back in Big Moose." He listened closely to the brief recital and then shook his head, his old face wreathed with a cunning grin. "No, Tom; I was out in the open an' near got caught half-a-dozen times. That Mesquite is a reg'lar hound. *Now* there's not only him, but them two outfits, with Cassidy leadin' 'em. With the grub you've brung me I can stay here near a month. You rustle right back an' set tight."

"Mebby yo're right," said the storekeeper.

"Reckon anybody saw ye leave town?"

"Nobody a-tall. I doubled a couple of times to mess things, an' see if I was bein' follered. Nobody knows I'm here."

"Then you better go back past Red Butte an' come in town over the Twin River trail."

"That's what I'm aimin' to do," said the storekeeper. "I'll let you know when things are safe. So-long."

"So-long, Tom, an' thankee," replied Shanghai, and went back to his lookout on the rim of the outer cliff. He watched his friend cross the valley and become swallowed by the hills on the other side, and then gazed steadily southward, the whole of the valley under his eyes. When twilight settled down he chuckled and descended to his cabin to cook supper, not worrying about any light his little fire might make. The air was growing nippy and the small blaze, reflected from the wall of the house, felt good to his old bones. On such a night as this he scorned the little fireplace of the crazy

dwelling, and preferred to sit out in the open until sleep drove him inside.

Supper over, he sliced a charge of tobacco from a new plug and in a moment was enjoying his pipe, staring into the small blaze of an Indian fire. He reviewed the past few weeks, the ever-present danger they had been full of, and the feeling of relief and gratitude that had come over him when he had safely reached this hide-out.

"No, sir!" he said emphatically to the fire. "I was glad enough ter git here, an' here I stays. Let 'em hunt an' be damned!"

Down in the great outer valley a horseman rode through the dark directly toward the bottom of the cliff where he had seen the storekeeper disappear and later come into sight again. The interval between the disappearance and reappearance of the old man had been eloquently short: he had not gone far in that short time, and some of the interval must have been spent in talk. There was just light enough to show the tracks of the other horse whenever they crossed a patch of alkali crust, and the rider held to his course without noticeable variation. Reaching the base of the cliff he dismounted, picketed his horse, and felt the rising of the cliff trail under his feet. Sight was not of much use here, so close to the base of the wall; but there are other senses than sight, and a horse sometimes leaves other signs than hoofprints.

Mesquite stopped and turned his head slowly, testing the air; and his first attempt to trace the sign led him along the bottom of the cliff until he knew that he had

gone too far. Going back again he came to the ledge, followed it upward, and quickly learned that he was on the right track. He was in no position to grow careless, to overlook any trick of woodcraft, for at his side the wall dropped straight down for a greater distance than he cared to think about. The click of a pebble might betray him, and in that silence the rubbing of leather on rock might reach listening ears. At last, after what seemed to be hours of straining effort to be noiseless, he reached the end of the upward climb and turned a corner. Ahead of him lay a gash in the rock, and after cautious progress he reached a turn and rounded it, to pause for a moment. High up on the right-hand wall there winked the faint reflection of a fire, and he now took time to remove his boots, cursing under his breath the possibility of stepping on a cactus.

The faint reflection of the fire grew plainer and reached downward as he slipped along the wall. A minute later he hugged the wall and remained rigid, for he had found what he sought. Twenty yards away was a small fire, lighting up the composite wall of the lean-to shack, the adobes pink and glowing, the rocks satiny gray, with deep, dark shadows outlining them. On a rock between the fire and the wall sat Shanghai, the old fox he had been pursuing for a month and for hundreds of miles.

Mesquite moved back a few inches and considered deeply. He wanted this man alive, and he had plenty of proof that the old thief was far too cunning and resourceful to take any chances with. After the days and nights he had spent in the chase, what were a few more

minutes to wait? Sixty feet was too far from any man that he did not want to have to shoot at.

Shanghai sighed contentedly, looked around, and gently knocked his pipe against a calloused hand. A careless man would have tapped the bowl on the rock to empty it; but even in the safety of this hide-out the instincts of the fox prevailed. Slicing more tobacco, the old man bent over to pick a brand from the fire, but found them too short to be pleasant to even his tough fingers. Taking a twig he thrust it into the coals, and quickly carried the blazing stick to the pipe bowl. This was his error, but one which left him blameless. For a moment the blaze was squarely in front of his eyes, masking the dark behind it; for a moment his eyes, focused on the blaze and the pipe bowl, were out of focus for a greater distance; and it is to the credit of the youth in the crevice that these two facts had been anticipated and were acted upon. With the raising of the firebrand to the pipe bowl Mesquite was on his silent, darting way.

Shanghai dropped the burning twig on the fire and then stiffened to a shock as great as any he had known in all his sinful life. A dozen feet away crouched an apparition behind a Colt which shone dully in the faint light of the fire. He relaxed, slowly raised his hands, and nodded.

"You shore deserve a lot of credit, youngster," said the old man, calmly. "Set down, an' tell me how you done it."

The youth snarled, smarting under the remembrance of a former conversation with this old fox, where words had been his undoing.

"Higher!" he snapped. "Keep still!"

The old man smiled, a forced smile, and one that was part of his strategy; but before he could change it he found his gun gone and the gun of his captor pressed solidly against his body.

"Turn 'round!" snapped Mesquite, and in another moment twin steel bracelets snapped over the lean old wrists. Another pair of handcuffs snapped around the ankles, chaining them together.

"Now," said Mesquite, stepping back, and smiling for the first time, "you can set down, an' we'll talk all you want."

Back in Big Moose the foreman of the Double-Y was arguing with his best friend and receiving the hearty endorsement of Red Connors and Lanky Smith, who had ridden in at dusk the day before, bound for the ranch. They had run out of provisions and patience and were willing to admit that they were beaten.

"But nobody knows when the Kid'll come back!" stated the foreman. "We're only wastin' time, waitin' like this."

"I'm askin' you to wait till noon," replied Hopalong, grinning, "which is twelve o'clock, exact."

"Why not eleven minutes after one?" inquired Red, sarcastically. "Sometimes you gimme an awful pain." He laughed loudly. "So Mesquite is goin' to bring the old fox in, huh? H-e-l-l!"

"It's ten-thirty now," offered Slim Reilly, looking at his watch.

"But how do you know how far away they are, even if the Kid gets him?" persisted Buck.

"I can figger that purty close," answered Hopalong. "It took Tom Jennings not quite a whole day to make the round trip, an' he went more roundabout comin' back. That means it's less'n half a day one way."

"Tom Jennings?" snorted Buck. "What the hell has Tom Jennings got to do with it?" He snorted again and walked to the door. Here he glanced carelessly across the little square, and stiffened as he swore in disbelief. Skinny pushed from against a wall and led the crowd to the foreman's side, and each man in it expressed his feelings in his own particular and impromptu way.

Across that square came two horses, one before the other. On the first, wrists behind him, ankles tied under the mount, rode Shanghai, the fox; behind him, looking neither to the right nor left, rode Mesquite Jenkins, the bob-cat, now turned watch dog.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Buck, loudly.

"Which I allus maintained," chuckled Hopalong. "You owe me a hundred."

"I certainly will be damned," said Buck, this time softly, and led the procession out of the building.

THE END

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